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# Beyond acquiescence and compromise: Organizational strategies in pluralizing institutional environments

Han Dahlmans<sup>1</sup>  | Tobias Goessling<sup>2</sup> | Patrick Kenis<sup>3,4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Tilburg School of Social and Behavioral Sciences (TSB), Tilburg, The Netherlands

<sup>2</sup>KEDGE Business School, Bordeaux, France

<sup>3</sup>School of Economics and Management (TiSEM), The Netherlands

<sup>4</sup>Tilburg Institute of Governance (TIG), The Netherlands

## Correspondence

Han Dahlmans, Tilburg School of Social and Behavioral Sciences (TSB), P O Box 90153, 5000 LE Tilburg, The Netherlands.

Email: [h.e.h.dahlmans@tilburguniversity.edu](mailto:h.e.h.dahlmans@tilburguniversity.edu)

## Abstract

We set out to investigate how organizations respond to the variety of requirements as experienced in their pluralizing institutional environments. We found that, in addition to acquiescence and compromise, Dutch vocational education and training (VET) organizations predominantly respond with cooperation and coordination strategies. Extensive multistage qualitative data analysis of 26 semi-structured in-depth interviews with management team (MT) members showed that cooperation and coordination are viable and effective response strategies to face a divergent and highly differentiated set of sometimes-conflicting institutional requirements. Our study advances understanding of how organizations deploy strategic choice to arrive at their strategic responses. It offers organizational leaders, legislators, policymakers, and other constituents' insights into complex reality of how contemporary organizations actually relate to and act in their pluralizing institutional environments.

## KEYWORDS

cooperation and coordination, institutional environments, institutional pluralism, institutional pressures, organizational strategies, strategic choice

## INTRODUCTION

Organizations exist in and are affected by their environments (Scott, 2010). “Institutions are social structures that have attained a high degree of resilience ... and provide stability and meaning to social life” (Scott, 2008b, p. 48). They “direct and circumscribe organizational behavior” (Kraatz & Block, 2008, p. 533). Organizations operate in institutional environments (Scott, 2010) and have to deal with multiple and sometimes-conflicting demands and expectations stemming from various institutional arrangements (Pache & Santos, 2010). This generates challenges and tensions as to how to respond to these institutional requirements (Greenwood et al., 2011; Kraatz & Block, 2008).

Institutional requirements are embedded in a higher-order societal logic—that is, an institutional logic (Friedland & Alford, 1991). Organizations facing “institutional pluralism” have to deal with prescriptions—often incompatible ones—from multiple institutional logics that call for different organizational

actions (Kraatz & Block, 2008). Organizations can adjust to requirements as they seek legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Greenwood et al., 2008), but equally may actively resist institutional pressures to secure organizational goals (Scott, 2005). Oliver (1991) addressed “strategic responses to institutional processes”, and her framework presents five response strategies (acquiescence, compromise, avoidance, defiance, and manipulation) that depend on the antecedents of strategic responses (cause, constituents, content, control, and context). Many empirical studies support Oliver’s framework by investigating organizational strategic responses to particular pressures (Battard et al., 2017; Greenwood et al., 2017). However, these studies do not focus on organizations’ strategic responses to the variety of pressures within the institutional environment that may be characterized as pluralistic. Yet organizations have to deal with different pressures simultaneously (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) and not just one at a time.

The ways in which organizations deal with this divergent and highly differentiated set of requirements, which is

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inseparable from analysis of organizational strategic responses (Greenwood et al., 2017), are at the center of this study. Oliver's (1991) framework provides a typology of the relationship between organizational strategic responses to institutional requirements, yet does not address "the conditions under which different response strategies are likely to be mobilized" (Pache & Santos, 2010, p. 456). Organizations are treated as unitary actors instead of complex entities with some level of agency and strategic choice. In this research, we address which different response strategies are mobilized by organizations that operate in pluralizing environments. We suggest that, in addition to Oliver's framework of response strategies, organizations follow more multi-sided, multi-party strategies to deal with the experienced variety of sometimes-conflicting demands. We thus conjecture that organizations operating in pluralizing institutional environments may likewise respond to the experienced variety of sometimes-conflicting requirements with pluralistic organizational strategies. This is what we will explore in the empirical study that follows.

At the organization's strategic level, the general or corporate management team (MT) is responsible and accountable for dealing with the variety of institutional requirements (Kraatz & Block, 2008). Although other organizational members have voice or agency too (Powell & Rerup, 2017), this "relatively small group of most influential executives at the apex of an organization" (Hambrick, 2015, p. 1) is the "primary shaper" (Finkelstein et al., 2009, p. 8) of organizational strategic responses to institutional pressures (Díaz-Fernández et al., 2019; Hooge, 2015; Kraatz & Block, 2008). We propose that the way MTs deal with the institutional requirements they experience, that is, how they act on the experienced level of strategic choice, is an important separate condition to be considered when analyzing how organizations actually arrive at their strategic responses to institutional pressures. Limited research has focused on understanding this relationship. We, therefore, examine what different institutional demands and expectations MTs actually experience, how they deal with these, and last, how their organizations respond to these pressures. We address the following research question: In what ways do MTs and their respective organizations deal with the variety of requirements they experience within their pluralizing institutional environments?

The Dutch vocational education and training (VET) sector is our empirical field of study. Educational organizations in general (Greenwood et al., 2011), and more specifically, VET organizations (Oliver, 2010), operate under conditions of institutional pluralism. MTs of VET organizations are held accountable by their constituents for their organizational strategic responses to the different institutional requirements (Hooge, 2015).

We make two contributions. First, we build on Greenwood et al.'s (2014) call for more research at the

organizational level to address the understanding of how present-day organizations are structured and managed. They argue that although field-level studies have undoubtedly proven their importance, it is necessary "to resurrect a distinctive interest in the organizational level of analysis, treating the organization as a significant source of variability and also as prominent actors" (p. 1210). Given the distinctive characteristics and challenges of contemporary VET organizations, "relying on the insights of studies conducted several decades ago means that we risk having little understanding of today's organizations" (p. 1210). It is important to understand how VET organizations deal with institutional pressures, because no matter how incompatible the demands and expectations from their pluralizing institutional environments are, "responses to highly incompatible prescriptions or demands will inevitably prioritize some requirements at the expense of others" (Greenwood et al., 2011, p. 319). This research is grounded in MTs' contextual reality and practice, and addresses the intricacies MTs experience in the complex systems they operate in (Kakabadse & Morley, 2021). It can help them reflect on actions and inactions.

Second, investigating different institutional contexts adds knowledge to understanding the relationship between institutional pressures and strategic responses, as well as to generalizability of institutional theory (Greenwood et al., 2014). Moreover, studying organizations that operate in highly institutionalized contexts where institutional forces come "from all quarters" of society and "push/pull" organizations in many different directions remains an interesting empirical phenomenon (Kraatz & Block, 2017, p. 536). It can help policymakers, legislators, and other constituents to interpret the forces that have an impact on VET organizations' actions (Greenwood et al., 2011).

The structure of this paper is as follows. First, we present our theoretical framework. Next, we describe the research context in which the institutional dynamics of interest take place, followed by our data collection and data analysis methods. We then present our findings. Last, we discuss the implications of how organizations deal with the different requirements they experience within their pluralizing institutional environments.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In this section, we first briefly present the literature's main insights on organizational institutionalism, followed by how organizations may respond to institutional requirements under conditions of institutional pluralism.

### Organizational institutionalism

Institutions are social structures that provide guidelines for human activities and social relations (Scott, 2008a). Organizational institutions are mental and moral orders

that comprise plural harmonious and oppositional elements (Kraatz & Block, 2017). Institutional pressures are exerted on organizations by external constituents and internal professionals (Greenwood et al., 2008; Pache & Santos, 2010). DiMaggio & Powell (1983) distinguished three types of institutional pressures: coercive, normative, and mimetic. Coercive pressures can be exerted by dependent organizations and cultural expectations in society, and are expressed in legal and technical requirements of the state and nongovernmental organizations. They can be conflicting and ambiguous, providing organizations with opportunities for agency and strategic choice. Normative pressures can stem from organizational professionals or from professional and trade associations. They express a correct moral choice and define a proper course of action. Mimetic pressures occur under conditions of uncertainty, such as inconsistent organizational goals and ambiguous problems with unclear solutions. Organizations may perceive their peer organizations as role models, and tend to adopt their peers' practices when they perceive them as legitimate and successful.

Scott (1995) elaborated on DiMaggio and Powell's three types of institutional pressures by arguing that institutions are composed of regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements, each providing a different basis for social order. Regulative elements refer to actors or actions—often the government or governmental bodies—that establish rules, inspect conformity, and impose sanctions. They are formalized and explicit, and can take the form of clear rules, directives, or sanctions. Normative elements are guidelines of appropriateness. They are prescriptive, evaluative, and obligatory. They include preferred values or desirable situations, and specify how things should be done. Cultural-cognitive elements provide socially constructed shared conceptions and cognitive templates for framing perceptions and decisions. These beliefs and assumptions about how things should be done may be either explicit conceptions or more unconscious ones. The three types of institutional pressures influence institutional processes. As Scott (2008b, p.51) commented, “Each offers a different rationale for claiming legitimacy, whether by virtue of being legally sanctioned, morally authorized, or culturally supported.”

Institutional requirements are embedded in a higher-order societal logic—that is, an institutional logic (Friedland & Alford, 1991). Institutional logics provide guidelines; they define the “rules of the game” of how organizations are supposed to act (Jackall, 1988). Thornton & Ocasio (1999) distinguished between market, state, corporate, professional, religious, and family logics. Each institutional logic provides a distinct set of regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive principles (Greenwood et al., 2011) that constrain organizational actions and provide opportunities for agency and strategic choice (Kraatz & Block, 2017; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008).

Although all organizations face a degree of pluralism (Denis et al., 2001), that is, situations wherein multiple elements are at stake (Kraatz & Block, 2017), an organization that operates in pluralistic institutional environments has to deal with “two or more games at the same time” (Kraatz & Block, 2008, p. 243). These organizations face an environment where multiple institutional logics, influencing identities, values, cognitive frameworks, and practices co-exist (Yu, 2015) and generate multiple institutionally given identities the organization must adapt to (Kraatz & Block, 2017).

The existence of logic multiplicity in organizations is not a homogenous phenomenon that is either present or absent (Besharov & Smith, 2014). Instead, there is a wide variety in how multiple logics manifest themselves within organizations. Organizations that face institutional pluralism have to deal with both pressures from their various constituents—people, organizations, institutions—and pressures from two or more institutional logics. These pressures may be partly compatible and complementary (Besharov & Smith, 2014), but they can be contradictory and conflicting, too (Kraatz & Block, 2008). The likelihood of institutional requirements conflicts increases when organizations “rely on and are responsive to multiple and uncoordinated constituents”—that is, high levels of fragmentation (Pache & Santos, 2010, p. 457)—and when they experience “competing influence of multiple and misaligned players whose influence is not dominant yet is potent enough to be imposed on organizations” (p. 458)—that is, moderate levels of centralization. The combined effect of high levels of fragmentation and moderate levels of centralization renders the greatest challenge for organizations.

Dutch VET organizations operate under these conditions (Hooge, 2015), increasing the likelihood of experiencing conflicting institutional requirements. Under these circumstances, some level of agency and strategic choice becomes a necessity because more than one organizational strategic response is considered appropriate (Pache & Santos, 2010). It requires MTs “to make decisions as to what demand to prioritize, satisfy, alter, or neglect” (p. 462) to secure institutional legitimacy and social support.

## Organizational strategic responses

Oliver's (1991) framework distinguishes between five types of organizational strategic responses to institutional pressures, providing a broad prediction of increased organizational resistance to multiple conflicting requirements (Pache & Santos, 2010). The response strategies—acquiescence, compromise, avoidance, defiance, and manipulation—range from passive compliance to active agency (Oliver, 1991). Acquiescence is a passive strategy referring to the conscious or less conscious organizational behavior of conforming to preconscious or

taken-for-granted institutional requirements. When confronted with conflicting institutional demands, organizations are unlikely to acquiesce because compliance with one demand requires defying others. A compromise strategy is also in the spirit of conforming to institutional pressures by partial compliance through mild alteration of the requirements and/or responses. The avoidance strategy is an organization's active attempt to preclude the necessity of conformity by circumventing the conditions that make conformity necessary. Even more active resistance is at play when organizations employ a defiance strategy by directly rejecting demands and expectations. The most active level of resistance is manipulation of institutional demands and expectations.

According to Oliver (1991), variation in choice of strategy depends on why pressures are being exerted (cause), who is exerting them (constituents), what the pressures are (content), how they are exerted (control), and where they occur (context). Organizations are pressured to conform to institutional pressures for reasons (cause) of social and economic fitness. More resistant strategic responses are bound by multiplicity of constituent demands and dependence on institutional constituents (constituents). Compliance with demands and expectations is more likely when they are consistent with organizational goals and when the degree of discretionary constraints imposed on the organization is low (content). Institutional pressures can be exerted (control) by means of legal coercion or enforcement, or via voluntary diffusion. High levels of environmental uncertainty and interconnectedness lower the likelihood of resistant strategic responses (context). According to Pache & Santos (2010), Oliver's framework does not systematically predict under which specific conditions different response strategies are likely to be mobilized. They extend Oliver's framework by arguing that two interacting mechanisms influence why organizations may favor some responses over others when confronted with conflicting institutional requirements. First, they take into account whether the conflict is about organizational means or goals. Because negotiation is easier on organizational means than on goals, more resistant response strategies are more likely when the conflicting requirements are related to goals rather than to means. Second, the degree to which the conflicting institutional requirements are internally represented—absent, single, or multiple—and the balance of power among these categories shape the stakes involved in the response and, consequently, the likelihood of specific response strategies.

Dutch VET organizations' constituents exert pressures on both means and goals (Hooge, 2015). When these requirements conflict, multiple sides of the conflict are likely to be internally represented. Under these conditions, VET organizations may feel the need to take the multiple sides of the conflict into account to secure

organizational legitimacy. Because the internal power structure of Dutch VET organizations is balanced (Hooge, 2015), more resistant response strategies are unlikely (Pache & Santos, 2010). Therefore, they may want to make sure the various requirements on organizational goals and on means as imposed by both external and internal constituents are accommodated as much as possible. We suspect that this may lead to more pluralistic response strategies representing the different sides of a conflict.

## METHODOLOGY, DATA COLLECTION, AND ANALYSIS

The purpose of this study is to advance our understanding of the relationship between the various institutional requirements as experienced by MTs, how they deal with these, and how their organizations respond to the pressures. VET organizations in the Netherlands have to deal with a complex set of institutional requirements stemming from a wide variety of constituents (Drodge, 2002; Halasz, 2011; Hooge, 2015; Oliver, 2010; Pache & Santos, 2010). They operate in pluralizing institutional environments, within which they depend on a few key resource providers (Greenwood et al., 2011; Pache & Santos, 2010). These organizations share the characteristics of the phenomenon we aim to study (Miles et al., 2020), and provide us with the opportunity to gain a generous description of the institutional dynamics of interest (Bell et al., 2022).

Hence, the Dutch VET sector, consisting of 43 VET organizations, is an appropriate empirical setting for our study. The unit of analysis is the individual VET organization. Although all institutional members have the ability to affect institutional processes, organizational leaders have a disproportionate opportunity to do so (Kraatz & Block, 2017). Oliver (1991) emphasized the importance of empirically examining organizational strategic responses to institutional pressures using research methods that include the perceptions of the organization's leaders. Therefore, MT members of Dutch VET organizations are our unit of observation. We applied a qualitative research strategy (Bell et al., 2022) and used in-depth semi-structured interviews with these MT members to capture the perceptions of organizational leaders. Most of the MTs consist of the chairperson, member(s), secretary, educational department directors, and service department directors.

The VET sector educates about 40% of the Dutch working population at levels 1–4 of the European Quality Framework (European Parliament and Council, 2008), preparing youngsters and adults for the labor market, further education, and good citizenship. The size of a VET school in terms of student enrolment varies between 2,210 and 27,509; the average size is 8,060 students. Over the course of 2018, about 450,000 students were enrolled

in 182 educational programs that provided a total of 952 specializations for initial schooling, retraining, further training, or reentry to education after a break. These programs were delivered via school-based or work-based learning.

Over the past 30 years, the institutional environment of VET organizations has changed because of societal and political developments. From working within a state logic only, they now have to deal with institutional requirements from state, market, and community (Oliver, 2010). VET organizations need to play into these three games simultaneously (Kraatz & Block, 2008), each prescribing and proscribing different organizational actions (Zoellner, 2020). From a state logic perspective, VET organizations must above all comply with the laws and regulations of the Dutch VET system, and are held accountable for such compliance (Honingh & van Genugten, 2017; Hooge, 2015). Market logic demands that educational programs be primarily based on and driven by the expectations, perceptions, and convictions of the world of work (Hooge, 2015). Community logic expects VET organizations to give close consideration to the demands and expectations of students, parents, and the local community (Hofman & Hofman, 2011). VET organizations are expected to play a central role in translating regional developments and challenges into educational needs and programs for all sorts of target groups. The ways in which VET organizations and their MTs deal with this highly differentiated set of requirements is at the center of this study.

## Data collection

We used three sensitizing concepts (Bell et al., 2022) with “a general sense of reference and guidance”, suggesting “directions along which to look” (Blumer, 1954, p. 7). Oliver’s (1991) antecedents and framework of strategic responses were both used to gain a genuine understanding of the institutional pressures as experienced by MT members (1) and the subsequent organizational strategic responses (2), respectively. MT agency and strategic choice (3) was used as a sensitizing concept to gain insight into how the MT acted on the experienced level of agency and strategic choice.

Table 1 presents an overview of the three sensitizing concepts, their related eight topic areas and corresponding a priori codes, and nine general interview questions. The position of the first author as an employee of the Dutch VET association offered sufficient access to MT members of VET organizations. We used purposive sampling (Bell et al., 2022) to select members with in-depth expertise of how their organization operates within its institutional environments. Organizations where the possibility of collecting objective data could be compromised by organizational circumstances such as financial difficulties were excluded beforehand. Potential

participants were emailed requesting voluntary participation based on succinct information. If interested, a phone call with more detailed information followed and, after consent was given, an interview was scheduled. Although it was a challenge to find MT members with the necessary expertise as well as the ability to schedule 90 min for the interview, the procedure yielded 17 participants. Using snowball sampling, we were able to identify another nine participants. During the 26 interviews, we used an interview guide with a flexible and adaptable structure of the interview questions along with related in-depth thematic and elaborative questions. This allowed the interviewer to deviate from the question sequence in order to ask for additional clarification and to follow up leads and interesting points.

Along nine general questions (see Table 1), the interviewees were asked to reflect on the institutional pressures they experienced, how the MT dealt with these, and how the organization responded to the requirements. Questions started with: “Can you state as specifically as possible in which different ways your organization deals with the requirements from the environment?” The following three questions were also aimed at understanding the institutional requirements as experienced by the MT members. Then the interviewees were asked to reflect on how their respective organizations responded to these institutional requirements, followed by four questions to gain insight into how the MT acted on the experienced level of agency and strategic choice. The data were collected between May and July 2018. To contextualize answers (Bell et al., 2022), demographic information about the interviewees was recorded, namely the interviewee’s job description, length of tenure in the current position within the organization, gender, and year of birth. The following organizational specificities were also noted: population size of the city where the main school building is located, province in which the organization is based, and number of students enrolled.

Table 2 displays the most important demographic information and organizational specificities. The 26 interviews were conducted in 15 VET organizations and lasted on average 66.5 min (SD 7.22). The interviews were conducted in Dutch, recorded with permission, transcribed verbatim, and imported into MAXQDA (VERBI Software, 2020) for analysis.

## Data analysis

We used a thematic analysis strategy (Bell et al., 2022), following Braun & Clarke’s (2006) six-phase method. The analysis of our rich dataset was both theory-driven and data-driven, and involved deductive as well as inductive coding using descriptive labels symbolizing a code’s meaning. More theory-driven, we applied the eight pre-defined a priori codes to segments of interview texts using concept coding (Miles et al., 2020). Some of these a priori

**TABLE 1** Topic areas, a priori codes, and interview questions based on three sensitizing concepts.

Sensitizing concepts	Topic areas	A priori Code	Interview questions
Experienced institutional pressures	What are the institutional pressures experienced by the MT members (source)?	1.	Can you state as specifically as possible in which different ways your organization deals with the requirements from the environment?
	Why is the organization being pressured to conform to institutional requirements (cause)?	2.	
	Who is exerting institutional pressures on the organization (who)?	3.	Can you describe the context in which you work as an organization?
	What norms or requirements is the organization being pressured to conform to (what)?	4.	
	How or by what means are the institutional pressures being exerted (means)?	5.	How do you experience this context?
	What is the environmental context within which institutional pressures are being exerted (context)?	6.	How, in your opinion, can this context be characterized?
Organizational strategic responses	What strategies (acquiesce, compromise, avoid, defy, manipulate) does the organization use to respond to the institutional pressures being exerted?	7.	In what ways does your organization respond to these pressures?
MT agency and strategic choice	In what way did the strategies come about?	8.	Can you indicate how these reactions are generated in your organization? How exactly does that process work in your organization? Who is involved and how? What is the role of the MT in this process?

Abbreviation: MT, management team.

**TABLE 2** Demographic information and organizational specificities.

Number of enrolled students	< 5,000	3 interviews	2 organizations	
	5,000 < 10,000	7 interviews	4 organizations	
	10,000 < 15,000	8 interviews	5 organizations	
	15,000 < 20,000	6 interviews	3 organizations	
	≥ 20,000	2 interviews	1 organization	
City size	G4 (large city)	10 interviews		
	G 32 (mid-sized city)	15 interviews		
	Remaining group (< G32 city)	1 interview		
Job description MT member	MT chairperson	3 interviews		
	MT member	5 interviews		
	Departmental director	18 interviews		
Gender	11 Females/15 Males			
	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Age	39	65	56	6.45
Job tenure	1	28	7	6.04
Tenure present VET organization	1	38	14	13.13
Tenure VET sector	1	40	21	13.06

Abbreviations: MT, management team; VET, vocational education and training.

codes, such as “cause of pressure”, encompassed a priori subcodes—that is, Scott’s (1995) “regulative causes”, “normative causes”, and “cultural-cognitive

causes”. Other a priori codes, such as “MT agency and strategic choice”, did not encompass a pre-defined a priori subcode and were subcoded following a more

data-driven inductive approach. Also, some codes were both deductively and inductively coded. For instance, the a priori code “organizational strategic responses” did encompass pre-defined subcodes—that is, the organizational strategic responses from Oliver’s (1991) framework.

We additionally followed a more inductive coding approach in search of other organizational response strategies, and found “cooperation”, “competitive strategy”, “response not specified”, and “implement”. During this systematic initial coding process, we identified one other code in addition to the eight a priori codes, “intraorganizational relationships”. We reread the interviews several times during this recursive process (Braun & Clarke, 2006), going back and forth in sorting, sifting, and organizing the applied codes and subcodes, and reflecting on them to identify similarities, differences, overlaps, relationships, and potential patterns (Miles et al., 2020). This coding phase resulted in 5,659 coded text segments within nine codes. Alongside, we followed a more inductive approach to search for synthesis and repeated patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Miles et al., 2020). Over 200 jottings and notes with ideas, insights, questions, and thoughts on the data set were assigned to a particular text segment or to the data set as a whole. The number of coded text segments were used as visual representations to sort out the codes, and functioned as a lead in our search for themes. Further condensing our data, we analyzed these jottings and notes in conjunction with the codes and subcodes applied to the text segments in search of broader, more theoretical themes.

## FINDINGS

The analysis revealed some interesting similarities between the VET organizations. Besides acquiescence and compromise, they predominantly use cooperation as an organizational response strategy. In addition, MTs deploy coordination as a way to deal with the experienced institutional requirements. “Coordination refers to the attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes related to deliberation, negotiation, and agreement on a common goal, while cooperation refers to attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes related to the implementation of a common goal” (Castañer & Oliveira, 2020, p. 984). Cooperation by definition follows coordination for a given goal. Before further detailing these findings, we first briefly present the data on the institutional pressures as experienced by MT members and the expectations placed upon them.

### Pressures experienced by the MT members

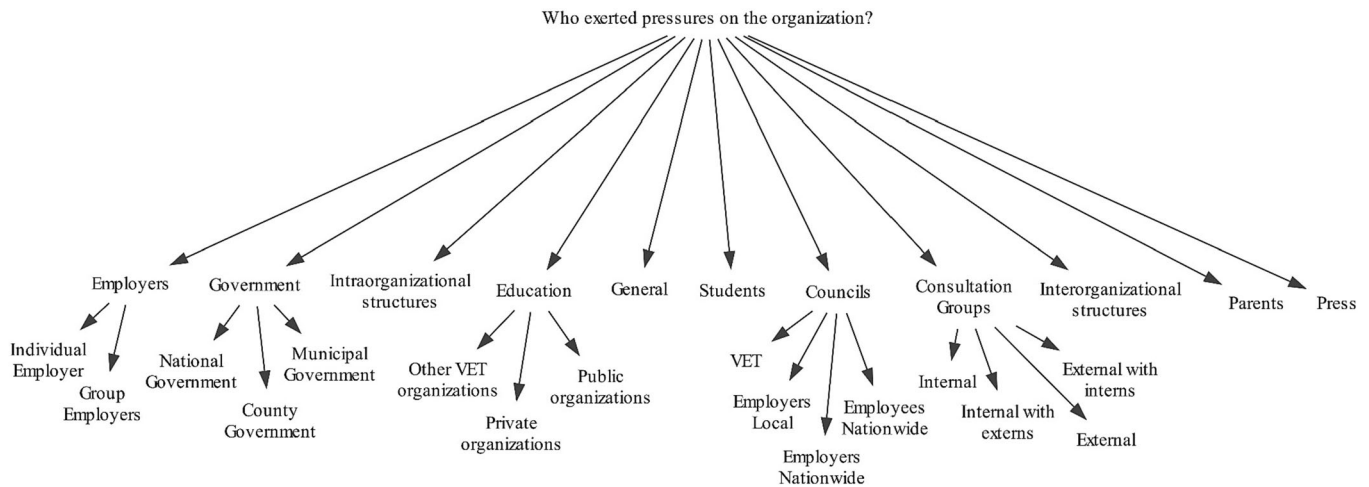
Consistent with Pache & Santos (2010), our findings clearly show that Dutch VET organizations experience a

**TABLE 3** Codes and subcodes of experienced pressure with number of coded text segments.

Code and subcodes of experienced pressure	Number of coded text segments
Source of pressure	Total 825
Internal conflicting interests	159
External conflicting interests	151
Governance issues	137
Laws and regulations	87
Competitive issues	55
Societal issues	40
Labor market	39
Accountability issues	38
Public opinion	34
Government	25
Religion	20
Ambiguity	18
Nature of relationship	18
General, not specified	4
Cause of pressure	Total 104
Normative causes	55
Cultural-cognitive causes	32
Regulative causes	17
What are the pressures	Total 704
Legal requirement	271
Labor market requirement	156
Cultural expectation	149
Curriculum requirement	71
Relationship expectation	57
Means through which pressures are exerted	Total 276
Enforcement activity	60
Report	50
Expression of how things should be done	46
Grant	46
Contract	30
Personal relationship (e.g., an informal conversation)	30
Reward	10
Sanctioning activity	4

wide variety of institutional requirements (see Table 3) from diverse external constituents and internal professionals (see Figure 1). Table 3 displays the number of coded text segments of the subcodes of sources of pressure, causes of pressure, what the pressures are, and how and by what means the pressures are exerted. Interviewees named experienced pressures (825 text segments) from various sources—inductively coded into 14 categories—and often conflicting in nature. Following Scott’s (1995) typology of causes of institutional pressures, a





**FIGURE 1** Subcodes and sub-subcodes of the constituents that exert pressures on Dutch VET organizations. Abbreviation: VET, vocational education and training

total of 104 text segments provided explicit information on reasons why VET organizations were pressured to conform to institutional demands and expectations. Text segments with the code “what” (704) refer to specific and detailed statements of norms or requirements, and were inductively coded into five subcodes.

Inductively subcoded into eight categories, the code “means” (276 text segments) was assigned to remarks that refer to the specific ways and means in which the experienced pressures were exerted. Oliver (1991) suggested generating a list of constituents to assess multiplicity. Figure 1 provides a varied and detailed overview of people, organizations, and institutions that exert institutional pressures on VET organizations. The coded text segments, 1,601 in total, were inductively subcoded, resulting in 11 subcodes, five of which were subsequently subcoded once more (resulting in sub-subcodes).

Overall, numerous often-conflicting pressures were experienced, relating to specific educational issues as well as broader societal issues.

## Organizational strategic responses

Organizational strategic responses, which accounted for 955 text segments in total, were subcoded into nine categories that comprised Oliver’s (1991) five response strategies and four inductively developed subcodes. The data show that organizations predominantly use compromise (358), acquiescence (313), and cooperation (147) response strategies. Considerably less mentioned were the subcodes corresponding to Oliver’s response strategies to manipulate (44), defy (4), and avoid (1), and the inductively developed subcodes “competitive strategy” (34), “response not specified” (32), and “implement” (22).

A compromise strategy is often indispensable to reduce pressures between external constituents and the focal organization, between internal professionals, and between external constituents and internal professionals. VET organizations have to deal with situations wherein varied and possibly conflicting requirements from external constituents and internal professionals co-exist. As a response, these organizations tend to compromise between different external conflicting demands; between conflicting internal expectations; and, consequently, between various external and internal conflicting interests.

VET organizations frequently respond with an acquiescence strategy by blindly following laws and regulations they take for granted. Because their public funding depends on adherence to laws and regulations, these are often felt as a minimum standard. This is consistent with Oliver’s (1991) framework. In general, the likelihood of more resistant organizational responses increases under conditions of high constituent multiplicity. But when schools are highly dependent on the government for financial means, resistance to their institutional requirements is unlikely. At the same time, some educational laws and regulations are in fact frameworks that have a broad nonspecific scope, leaving room for different interpretations. Consequently, VET organizations have discretionary leverage as to how to respond. What also creates scope for multiple interpretations is the Ministry of Education’s encouragement of schools to operate according to the spirit rather than to the letter of these laws and regulations. However, many VET organizations have first-hand experience of a tendency on the part of the Educational Inspectorate to interpret laws and regulations more to the letter. This contradiction creates feelings of uncertainty among some VET organizations,

triggering them to comply with laws and regulations even more strictly than required. One interviewee put it like this:

What also applies to this organization is that we are more structured and have more internal rules than required. Nationwide we have to comply with a particular legal framework with leverage for experimentation. But it is very difficult to act accordingly, because the internal machinery prescribes even more quality performance indicators than the Educational Inspectorate requires.

(Interview 10, from text segment 35, author's translation)

In trying to forestall negative inspectorate reports or penalties for compliance failures, some VET organizations create regimes that are stricter or more burdensome than necessary. They also consciously and strategically obey institutional demands and expectations—for example, when a municipality orders a VET organization to educate young dropouts who are beyond the compulsory-education age. Although this results in various organizational, group dynamic, and pedagogical and didactic challenges, VET organizations tend to comply because they feel responsible for youth education within their region. To meet municipal requirements, they actively accommodate organizational policies, structures, and processes.

Also in the spirit of conforming to institutional pressures, VET organizations invest substantially in cooperating with external constituents. Consistent with Castañer & Oliveira's (2020) definition, our data show that MTs deploy cooperation as a carefully planned, consciously chosen strategic response to improve the VET organization's legitimacy or financial position and to implement shared goals. Cooperation activities involve various constituents, depending on the goals and ambitions. As a response to the different requirements in a pluralizing institutional environment,

we will have to work together, because that will make us better. So, we cooperate.

(Interview 21, from text segment 105, author's translation)

The aim of cooperation is

to achieve our common goal.

(Interview 22, from text segment 27, author's translation)

The focus of cooperation is mainly on building and sustaining effective structures with strong organizational ties, and on long-term relationships built on trust and equality. This requires a lot of the time and effort of

multiple professionals throughout different levels of the organization, as well as purposeful allocation of the organization's financial resources. Most VET organizations employ several specialized professionals who are explicitly assigned to establish and strengthen cooperation with constituents. When cooperation is perceived as indispensable and important, it can result in reduced feelings of pressure and the need to respond in ways that are more resistant. It can increase feelings of mutual awareness, understanding, connectedness/interconnectedness, and leverage. It can boost organizations' abilities to influence one another and to respond adequately, constructively, and quickly to common challenges. It can result in possibilities and subsequent cooperative activities that would not have existed otherwise. Cooperation is deployed as an alternative response strategy to compromise and acquiescence. Our data show that within cooperation as a response strategy, compromise and acquiescence response strategies are adopted simultaneously.

MTs use coordination for deliberation, negotiation, and agreement on shared goals (Castañer & Oliveira, 2020). They engage in coordination activities with, for example, constituents from the labor market, governmental officials, other educational organizations, and internal professionals. Coordination is deployed as a way to listen to, collect, understand, perceive, and interpret institutional demands and expectations.

This is a network structure I will continue to be a part of, which does not immediately produce anything. But I think I should stay connected. It provides me with a sense of how the outside world is changing and what possible requirements may be imposed on us in the future.

(Interview 2, from text segment 29, author's translation)

Coordination activities vary in the level of formal structure, frequency, and organizational impact. They can be focused solely on other MTs, or they can encompass multiple external and internal organizational layers. Coordination is present- as well as future-oriented, and both formal and informal in nature. It is described as continuous, cyclic, and outwardly directed. It manifests itself in various permanent and temporary structures, such as discussion groups, consultation groups, committees, expert teams, project teams, and advisory groups. Coordination activities are analytical, political, administrative, strategic, tactical, operational, ethical, financial, organizational, and practical in nature. They address societal issues, questions of efficiency and effectiveness, quality standards, internal organizational objectives, financial and legitimacy risks, ambiguity in demands and expectations, and priorities in requirements, as well as whether the VET organization and its employees have

the required expertise to meet these various requirements. Through coordination activities different possible strategic responses can be considered, discussed, and aligned outside as well as within the organization.

We participate in this initiative, which is a kind of innovation lab, to see what will happen to us in five years in terms of the choices we now make.

(Interview 26, from text segment 139, author's translation)

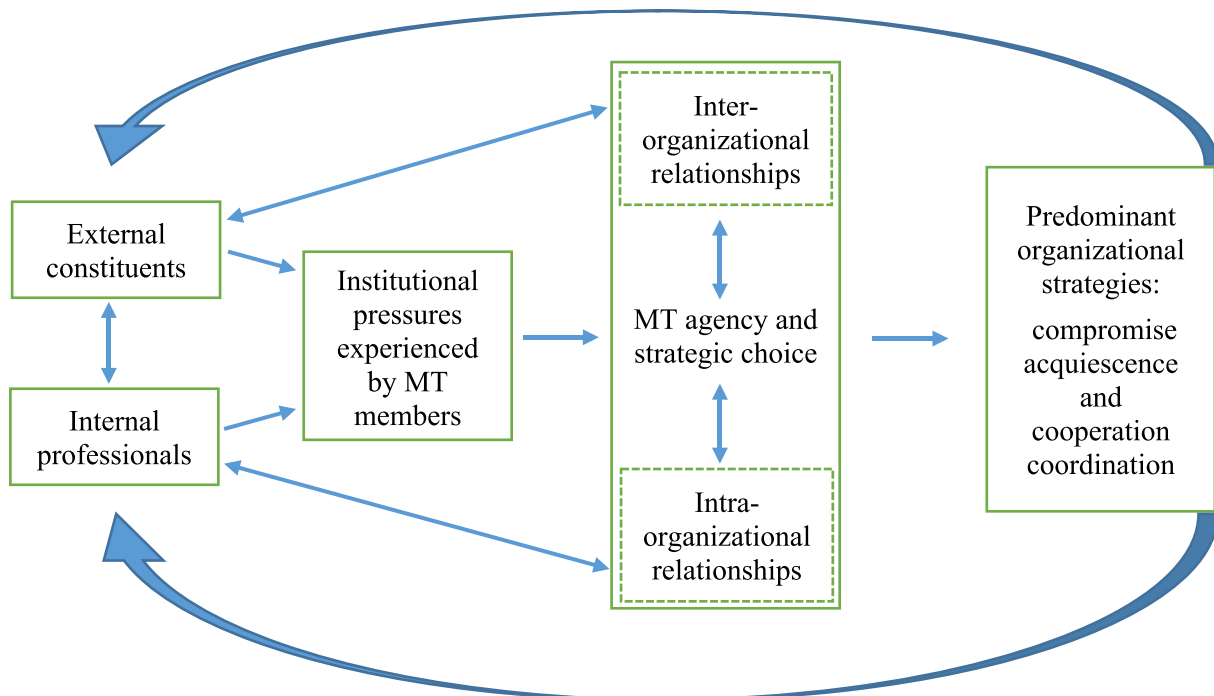
Our data show that VET organizations predominantly respond to the variety of experienced institutional requirements deploying Oliver's (1991) response strategies to acquiescence and compromise. We found that they use cooperation. MTs engage in coordination activities as a means to deal with the often-contradictory and conflicting institutional pressures they experience in their pluralizing environments. Consistent with Castañer & Oliveira (2020), we find that cooperation and coordination are distinguishable. They encompass different activities with different purposes in the process of how VET organizations actually arrive at their strategic responses to institutional pressures. Organizational response strategies, including cooperation, have a predominantly substantive focus, whereas coordination is mainly process-oriented. Our findings show that cooperation and coordination occur in tandem.

## DISCUSSION

Using Oliver's (1991) typology of the relationship between organizational strategic responses to institutional pressures, we set out to investigate the relationship between the variety of requirements within pluralizing institutional environments as experienced by Dutch VET organizations' MT members, how they deal with them, and how their organizations respond to these requirements. Based on our findings, we propose a systemic perspective (see Figure 2) that highlights the cyclic process of these institutional dynamics.

Institutional pressures manifest themselves both outside and within an organization (Pache & Santos, 2010). Our findings clearly show that Dutch VET organizations experience a wide variety of institutional demands and expectations from diverse external constituents, as well as from internal professionals. External constituents and internal professionals interact with one another through various permanent and temporary inter- and intraorganizational structures. These interactions influence institutional requirements and, consequently, how MTs experience the mixture of institutional pressures of their pluralizing environments.

VET organizations predominantly respond to these requirements via a strategy of compromise and acquiescence. Organizations may conform with compatible and complementary institutional requirements, but acquiescence is an unlikely response when pressures are



**FIGURE 2** Systemic perspective of experienced institutional pressures, MT agency and strategic choice, and organizational strategic responses. Abbreviation: MT, management team

contradictory and conflicting, because conformity with the requirements of one constituent signifies inconformity with pressures from other external constituents or internal professionals (Oliver, 1991). Alternatively, organizations may opt for a compromise response strategy to achieve partial conformity with all requirements (Oliver, 1991), especially when the conflict is about organizational means (Pache & Santos, 2010).

Our findings show that VET organizations also experience conflicting pressures on organizational goals. They rely on a variety of external constituents that hold distinct views of what the organization is about and what it stands for. Multiple sides of the conflict are often internally represented, and internal power structures are relatively balanced. Compromise will then be difficult because organizational goals are not easily negotiable (Pache & Santos, 2010). In the revisit of their 2010 paper, Pache & Santos (2021) concluded that avoidance and defiance are also unlikely responses because of the potentially negative consequences for organizations. They argue that organizations therefore “may be increasingly inclined to favor compromise or manipulation response strategies (as well as a combination of the two) when facing competing institutional demands” (p. 654). However, because power structures are relatively balanced within VET organizations, manipulation strategies will more likely fail, as they may lead to organizational paralysis or breakup (Pache & Santos, 2010). A compromise strategy seems to be the most likely response to competing institutional requirements on organizational goals when at least two sides of the conflict are internally represented and internal power structures are relatively balanced.

In addition to acquiescence and compromise, VET organizations also invest substantially in cooperation with external constituents and internal professionals. Cooperation is a carefully planned, consciously chosen strategic response that aims not only to improve the VET organization’s legitimacy or financial position, but also, consistent with Castañer & Oliveira (2020), to implement shared goals with its constituents. Cooperation is deployed as an alternative response strategy to compromise and acquiescence. Our data show that within cooperation as a response strategy, compromise and acquiescence response strategies are adopted simultaneously. Not excluding the possibility of single effects, our findings evidence that organizational strategic responses to the requirements of pluralizing institutional environments are more complex—that is, multiple response strategies and tactics can be deployed simultaneously and/or in succession—than Oliver’s conceptual framework suggests. We use that framework as a basis for examining the phenomenon of how organizations respond to the different requirements they experience within their pluralizing institutional environments. Dutch VET organizations and their MTs provide the empirical setting to explore this phenomenon.

VET organizations use coordination with external constituents and internal professionals as a means for MTs to deal with institutional pressures. Coordination is thus used as a way to listen to, collect, connect with, understand, perceive, and interpret institutional requirements. Consistent with Castañer & Oliveira (2020), through coordination different possible strategic responses can be considered, discussed, and aligned outside as well as within the organization. Our data suggest that MTs use coordination also to deploy some active agency.

Much research addresses interorganizational relationships in the nonprofit sector (Guo & Acar, 2005). AbouAssi & Tschirhart (2018) mentioned that an organization’s strong ties with constituents can serve as a form of checks and balances. Schools in general (Glatter, 2016), and more specifically, VET organizations (Drodge, 2002), use these relationships to relax tensions between conflicting requirements. Although benefits of interorganizational relationships have been widely reported, they can be detrimental and dysfunctional for the focal organization as well (Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2018; Jacobs, 2010; Oliveira & Lumineau, 2019). It may, for instance, lead to conflict, opportunism, and unethical practices.

The specific role of MTs in interorganizational relationships remains largely unexamined (Ihm & Shumate, 2019), which is surprising given the possible advantages and disadvantages for organizations. This research shows that VET organizations invest substantially in cooperation and coordination. In addition to acquiescence and compromise, MTs believe that cooperation is a viable and effective response strategy to the sometimes-conflicting demands and expectations they experience. Coordination activities with external constituents and internal professionals provide MTs with opportunities for agency and strategic choice. Cooperation and coordination are distinguishable but interrelated (Castañer & Oliveira, 2020; Greenwood et al., 2017). This research shows they occur in tandem when VET organizations deal with the variety of requirements they experience in their pluralizing institutional environments.

Drodge (2002) argued that Dutch VET organizations face the dilemma that the VET system is driven at the organizational level but implemented at the team level. Cooperation and coordination is indispensable to address this dilemma. For example, how schools choose to implement the nationally issued qualification specifications at the organizational level is the MT’s responsibility. Focused outwardly, the MT decides how to deal with aspects like examination and internship requirements for all curricula offered by the VET organization. How these requirements are then operationalized in specific curricula for specific groups of students is the responsibility of an educational team. For the MTs, this creates the dilemma of how to achieve alignment between these two levels. Based on our data, we argue that by using

coordination to ascertain from internal professionals how they experience institutional pressures and how they deal with them at the team level, MTs are better able to respond to these pressures at the organizational level.

Institutional pressures on specific educational requirements are often an element of a broader societal issue. For instance, requirements on language and mathematical skills are an element of the broader societal debate about which knowledge and skills early-stage professionals should master in an increasingly complex society. Many organizations—for example, VET and other educational organizations, local and provincial governments, youth care and welfare organizations, and individual employers and employers' associations—are collectively responsible and accountable for addressing these kind of broader societal issues (Ihm & Shumate, 2019; Woodland & Hutton, 2012). These issues cannot be dealt with by individual organizations alone, nor can they be addressed merely by adding up the involved individual organizations' contributions to the issue at hand. Our data show that institutional pressures on societal issues are exerted upon the involved organizations individually. However, these organizations, including VET organizations, are often required or expected to respond to these kind of issues collectively. Therefore, VET organizations invest substantially in coordination with external constituents.

This study can increase awareness among VET organizations and their constituents that coordination is required to address societal issues. Instead of exerting pressures on individual organizations, focusing on the collectives may be a better way to deal with societal issues, as often these are already being dealt with at the collective level. In addition, VET organizations could reflect on whether they sufficiently deploy coordination to address societal issues, and schools may adjust their deployment of coordination activities accordingly. Further research is needed to more specifically understand, at the level of the collective of constituents, how to deal with societal issues.

Focusing on MT members as objects of observation limits our research. External constituents and internal professionals influence MTs' agency and strategic choices, and consequently their organizational strategic responses. They should be included as objects of observation in future research. More knowledge on how the deployment of cooperation and coordination is actually experienced by external constituents and internal professionals may provide a more detailed understanding of how organizations actually arrive at their organizational strategic responses. This study shows that MTs believe cooperation and coordination to be indispensable to face institutional pluralism, especially when experiencing conflicting requirements. Further research can shed a brighter light on whether their constituents experience the same necessity and urgency. Organizations increasingly have to operate in pluralizing environments where they

face conflicting requirements they need to find effective responses for (Pache & Santos, 2021). Acquiescence and compromise as predominant strategies to deal with these requirements confirm Oliver's (1991) and Pache & Santos's (2010) predictions. Our findings show that cooperation and coordination as additional strategies are congruent with acquiescence and compromise. Both confirmation of and congruence with former theory are important transferability criteria in qualitative research (Miles et al., 2020). We presume that our findings do not solely apply to the VET organizations involved in this study, but also to educational, health, and social-sector organizations (Pache & Santos, 2021), which deal with similar institutional dynamics. We suggest further research in this direction.

Despite its limitations, we consider this study to be a valuable general contribution to a better understanding of why and how organizations behave as they do and, more specifically, which response strategies they view as viable and effective. We have shown that VET organizations invest substantially in cooperation and coordination, with both external constituents and internal professionals, to deal with the requirements of their pluralizing institutional environments. Cooperation and coordination are different processes with different characteristics occurring in tandem. A better understanding of how MTs deploy agency and strategic choice advances our understanding of how organizations actually relate to and act in their environment under conditions of institutional pluralism, especially when experiencing conflicting requirements.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## ORCID

Han Dahlmans  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6744-3904>

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

**Han Dahlmans** is a PhD Candidate at Tilburg School of Social and Behavioral Sciences and a Policy Advisor at the Dutch VET association.

**Tobias Goessling** is a Professor of Business Ethics, KEDGE Business School.

**Patrick Kenis** is a Professor of Public Governance at the School of Economics and Management (TiSEM) and Managing Director at Tilburg Institute of Governance (TIG).

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