

**SUSTAINABILITY IN DUTCH HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS: AN  
INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE**

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## ABSTRACT

This study hopes to reflect the theoretical significance of DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) institutional isomorphism theory in order to explain the growing similarity between Dutch higher education institutions with regards to sustainability efforts and practices. To provide an extensive look into how organizational change shapes the unfolding substantive developments in higher education institutions, a qualitative multiple case study methodology is utilized. While doing so, institutional document analysis will be used to explore the dynamics of isomorphic pressures. The research question that will be discussed in this study seeks to analyze the effect of isomorphic pressures on the adoption of sustainable practices.

As one of the leading exponents of institutional theory literature, DiMaggio and Powell guide the conventional understanding by arguing that organizations converge in terms of their practices and behaviors over time, which leads to an increasing homogeneity within an organizational field. In their work and in related references, it was observed that this homogeneity can be explained through three types of driving forces: coercive, normative and mimetic pressures. These three individual forces create a sense of legitimacy and acceptance within an organizational field which determines the survival of an institution.

By building on this theory, this study reviews the sources of isomorphic pressures and investigates the Dutch higher education institutional field to explore its effect on the adoption of sustainable practices.

**Keywords:** Institutional isomorphism, sustainability, institutional theory, higher education

## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Environmental issues such as climate change, pollution and global warming are rapidly becoming a strategic concern for organizations as the need for initiating and maintaining sustainable practices gain priority. Human activities, especially global agricultural production have increased the level of greenhouse gas emissions by approximately 80% since 1970 (Bennetzen et al., 2016). As the global challenge of climate change grows more serious everyday, concerns on environmental problems triggered a process where sustainable practices became a priority to organizations all over the world. According to the Brundtland Commission's final report (n.d.), sustainable development is defined as follows: "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". This definition of sustainable development contains three aspects of sustainability: environmental, social and economic. However, as the concept of sustainability is a relatively broad one, this research focuses only on the environmental sustainability. More precisely, this study addresses the role of isomorphic pressures as a sustainability initiators in the Dutch higher education field and argues that these pressures positively influence the level of sustainability in higher education organizations. Designed as a multiple case study, this thesis utilizes qualitative methods. It relies on empirical evidence based on the systematic evaluation of institutional documents. For this purpose, the information gathered from the institutional websites and environmental reports of the chosen institutions will be selected, analyzed and synthesized when necessary. This analytic procedure will then yield useful data in the form of quotations, passages and references.

### 1.1 Research Question

Like all other institutions, higher education institutions have started to focus their policies on sustainable development with the aim of reducing the harmful effects of their operations.

Previous research suggests that there are various ways in which higher education institutions have attempted to incorporate sustainability in their agenda (Ferreira et al., 2014; Filho et al., 2019; Findler et al., 2018; Wals & Rodela, 2014). Higher education institutions play a critical role in addressing environmental issues by adopting and maintaining sustainable practices as a permanent institutional strategy which results in long-lasting effects for the environment and the society (Findler et al., 2018; Waas et al., 2014).

The main aim of this study is to utilize the institutional isomorphism theory of DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) to explain the effect of isomorphic pressures in higher education organizations with regards to implementation of sustainable operations and practices. Previous studies have analyzed the role of institutional pressures on the adoption of organizational practices and the research suggests that institutions sought acceptance and legitimacy by conforming to dominant strategies within the organizational field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The converging practices of organizations is explained through the presence of three forces: coercive, normative and mimetic pressures. The research question, therefore, seeks to analyze whether the pressures derived from the institutional isomorphism theory could explain the presence of sustainable practices in Dutch universities. The research question of this study is as follows: "*How do different institutional pressures affect the adoption of sustainable practices in Dutch higher education institutions?*". By looking at the organizational field of Dutch higher education institutions for the presence of these factors, it is theorized that one can better explain the growing similarity between sustainable practices and behaviors.

## **1.2 Gap in the Literature**

According to the study of Mizruchi and Fein (1999), the institutional isomorphism theory of DiMaggio and Powell (1983) has become socially constructed due to the use of selective

interpretation. Mizruchi and Fein further asserted that the discussion of mimetic isomorphism has received disproportionate attention from the researchers. Even though they documented the presence of more than 160 studies that used DiMaggio and Powell's framework, only a very limited number of studies incorporated all three isomorphic pressures. Furthermore, although the existing literature looks at the influence of institutional pressures on organizations, studies that integrate the isomorphic pressure theory with sustainability in higher education institutions are scarcely found in the current literature. Based on these reasons, this study aims to fill this unexplored area in the literature by incorporating all three forces in the theory.

Additionally, this study uses qualitative research method in order to empirically test the influence of isomorphic pressures on the adoption of sustainable practices, which is an unusual method in the institutional change literature.

### **1.3 Significance of the Research**

Environmental issues such as pollution, climate change and environmental degradation have led to great debates and concerns in many countries in the last decade, one of them being the Netherlands. The study of decision-making under environmental uncertainty gains increasing attention from the social science researchers and it carries considerable importance in the organizational literature (Galaskiewicz & Wasserman, 1989, p. 454). In order to successfully adopt and administer sustainable practices, organizations need to have access to information regarding the key drivers of these practices within the organizational field in which they operate. This increases the efficiency and impact of sustainability efforts, and ultimately improves both the organizational performance and our environment. Thus, this study carries considerable importance with regards to its possible influence on the sustainability performance in the organizational field of higher education.

#### **1.4 Structure of the Thesis**

The remainder of this thesis is structured as follows. After the introduction, the following chapter presents an overview of the institutional theory framework and the literature review of the relevant literature which the study will be based upon. The chapter concludes with the hypothesis development and expected empirical observations in line with the theory. The third chapter gives an overview of the research design, methods and operationalization. The fourth chapter presents the findings and the fifth chapter discusses the results and explores how and to what extent isomorphic pressures affect the initiatives taken by higher education institutions towards sustainability. Finally, the sixth chapter shows the main conclusions of this study. The thesis then concludes with suggestions for further research.

## **CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT**

### **2.1 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

If we were to consider the implementation of sustainable practices as a cognitive script or a model of organizational behaviour, then it becomes imperative to examine the circumstances and driving forces that push an organization to achieve organizational change. To do so, we should first unpack the institutional theory which underlines the role of socio-cultural factors in legitimating certain organizational ideas and behaviours, particularly deeply engrained ones. Building on the influential works of Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell, as well as John Meyer and Brian Rowen, the theoretical approach of this study will make use of the new sociological institutionalism which focuses on processes of isomorphism and isomorphic pressures. The new sociological institutionalism approach was developed through the study of organizations (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991) and institutional change (Meyer and Rowen, 1977). After presenting a literature review on motives for sustainable practices and sustainability in higher education institutions, institutional theory and sociological institutionalism will be discussed in order to demonstrate the mechanism of isomorphic pressures and processes of institutional homogenization.

#### **2.1.1 Motives for Engaging in Sustainable Practices**

The topic of institutional motivations for sustainability is receiving growing attention from the academic literature as the role of institutional practices plays in sustainable development has grown. Previous studies have shown that implementation of sustainable practices have been influenced by several factors. Based on the literature, these factors range from legitimacy to market success and organizational improvement (Bansal & Roth, 2000; Horak et al., 2018; Kurapatskie & Darnall, 2013; Windolph et al., 2014). For the purpose of providing a detailed overview, the following factors can be used as a reference point for most of the studies in the sustainability literature: (i) direct influence of rules and regulations by government on

organizations to reduce harmful effects to the environment (Zhu et al., 2013); (ii) cultural values regarding sustainability (Walker et al., 2008); (iii) pressure from environmental activists and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (Bernauer & Betzold, 2012); (iv) gaining social approval and legitimacy in order to survive (Meyer & Rowan, 1977); (v) institutional pressures (Dacin et al., 2002; Davidsson et al., 2006; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) and (vi) demands from consumers and stakeholders (Brønn & Vidaver-Cohen, 2009; Orlitzky, 2011).

Although academics tend to focus more on the economic aspect of the motivations for sustainability (Margolis & Walsh, 2003), since the focus of this study leans towards a neo-institutional perspective, it is necessary to emphasize socio-cultural factors that determine the socially dictated legitimate practices and behaviors in an organizational field. The authors who share this view would claim that the motivation of organizations to engage in sustainable practices would be gaining legitimacy, which would eventually lead sustainable behaviour to become institutionalized and cause organizations to grow more and more alike.

Consistent with the institutional approach adopted in this study, Campbell (2007) also emphasized the link between organizations and society that functions as a mechanism which pushes organizations to behave in ways that are embedded in the social context they operate in. Campbell (2007) believed that in order to understand why organizations behave in socially responsible ways, such as implementing sustainable policies, institutional mechanisms should be uncovered.

Matten and Moon (2008) on the other hand, approach the issue from a stakeholders perspective. According to them, motives of managers, shareholders, and other key stakeholders have an impact on the way organizations are governed and moreover, they emphasize the interdependencies between these actors which are essential given the link between organizational behaviour and its societal context.

There is a considerable body of studies in the institutionalism literature that suggest the existence of various institutional forces which determine the socially responsible and sustainable practices. Several of these studies brings forward the idea that institutional forces influencing socially responsible practices may be the consequence of the homogenization of institutional environments. These changing organizational behaviours are conveyed in regulative, normative, and cognitive processes which might result in increasingly standardized and rationalized forms and behaviours in a given organizational field (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Scott, 2014).

As one of the most prominent figures in the neo-institutional theory, Meyer and Rowan (1977) suggested that within any given organizational field, institutions demonstrate similar organizational forms and behaviors. They further explain that these organizational forms are deeply embedded in a social context in which an organization operates. This very context incorporates strong and rigid institutional rules that determine acceptable organizational forms and behaviours. Therefore legitimacy, in this sense, is attained through compliance with society's expectations with regards to the portrayal of the organization ("Isomorphism," 2010, p. 502). As the number of organizations that act in compliance with these expectations increases, certain sets of standards, norms and practices will become more associated with the expectations of society, which will eventually push the organizations in a field to adopt similar practices. This growing similarity between organizational responses which are in line with socially prescribed dictates in a given organizational field is called isomorphism (Mizruchi & Fein, 1999).

### **2.1.2 Sustainability Practices in Higher Education Institutions**

The recent developments in the global sustainability agenda have re-affirmed the urgency to transform our organizational models and practices and incorporate sustainability as a long-term goal. With regards to sustainable operations, higher education institutions present a critical role

due to their function as drivers of societal change. Additionally, higher education organizations have the unique opportunity to integrate sustainable development to a wide array of dimensions ranging from campus-management to more transformative and longer-term solutions such as educational and research areas. This part of the section reviews the academic literature for sustainable practices in various dimensions in higher education institutions.

Higher education institutions have been implementing sustainable policies in their operations and strategic plans as the awareness among institutions increased in the recent years. Previous studies have documented various ways in which higher education institutions have been addressing sustainability, including the social, economic and environmental aspects (Disterheft et al., 2015; Ferreira et al., 2014; Stough et al., 2018; Van Wynsberghe & Moore, 2015; Wals, 2014). Commonly, these include campus management, research and education, funding, raising awareness and involvement, energy, water, waste and mobility. Hallinger & Chatpinyakoo, 2019; Lozano et al., 2013; Stough et al., 2018).

In the literature, there are different opinions with regards to ideal sustainable practices and the criterias they are based on. There seems to be a lack of consensus regarding the role of higher education institutions in sustainable development and organizational change (Shawe et al., 2019; Velazquez et al., 2006). The role of higher education institutions as a key actor of transforming the society has been categorized in various ways, including sustainability reporting (Ceulemans et al., 2015), incorporation of sustainability into the curriculum (Hallinger & Chatpinyakoo, 2019; O'Byrne et al., 2015), as well as green initiatives with the purpose of raising awareness among the students and academic staff regarding climate change, energy use, food waste and water consumption (Amran & Haniffa, 2011; Caiado et al., 2019; Disterheft et al., 2015). In terms of its role to bring about organizational change, higher education institutions bear a critical responsibility to produce and spread knowledge, innovate and initiate sustainable practices for the public, private and civil society (Baker-Shelley et al.,

2017; Stephens et al., 2008). To date, higher education institutions have tried to incorporate sustainable policies in various ways and dimensions, which can be broadly categorized as the following: education, community/stakeholders, research, environmental reporting, operations and governance (Franco et al., 2019; Lozano et al., 2013; Stough et al., 2018; Wals, 2014). Table 1 offers an overview of the 6 most common categories of sustainable practices derived from the literature that was reviewed for this study.

**Table 1**

**Main Categories of Sustainable Practices at Higher Education Institutions**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Focus</b>
<b>Governance</b>	Institutional procedures and management systems.
<b>Education</b>	Integration of sustainability in the curriculum, awarded scholarships and staff training.
<b>Research</b>	Academic research and funding on sustainability and implementation of sustainable practices in research programmes.
<b>Operations</b>	Use of sustainable resources and general infrastructure.
<b>Environmental Reporting</b>	Published sustainability performance and assessment reports.
<b>Community / Stakeholders</b>	Communication and collaboration with internal and external actors and stakeholders.

Source: The Authors. (Franco et al., 2019; Lozano et al., 2013; Stough et al., 2018; Wals, 2014)

**2.1.3 Institutional Theory**

This chapter provides the theoretical framework that will be used in this study. This study builds on DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) classic framework of institutional theory in order to analyze the effect of isomorphic pressures on the adoption of sustainable efforts and practices. Institutional theory aims to uncover the logic behind organizational behavior as well as the processes of behavioral patterns. The foundations of institutional theory places itself in a wide range of research areas such as sociology, ethnography, business and political science. According to DiMaggio and Powell (1991) institutional theory presents a paradox (p.1). This paradox has been the cause of many classical debates, and produced different understandings

of organizations, namely old and new schools of institutionalism. Each institutional framework has its own unique explanation for organizational behavior and practices.

According to Powell and DiMaggio, both approaches share a scepticism toward rational-actor models of organisation, and both view institutionalisation as a state-dependent process that makes organisations act less rational due to constrained behavior (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991, p. 12). They further argue that both new and old institutionalism underline the relationship between organisations and their environments (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991, p. 12). Similarly, they both consider the role of culture in shaping the reality of organizations (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991, p. 12).

According to March and Olsen (1983), institutional behavior is affected by human actions, social contexts and inter-dependency between institutions which create action and establishing meaning (p. 743). This perspective focuses on the role of institutional structures as a roadmap for what could be considered “legitimate” or “acceptable” (March & Olsen, 1983).

According to Dacin, Goodstein and Stein (2002), despite institutional theory has expanded over time to explain both individual and organizational action, it generally focuses on the persistence and homogeneity of the phenomena. This aspect of the approach has been the cause of many criticisms due to its inability to acknowledge the capacity of institutions to change with regards to their character and potency over time (p. 45). Therefore, they further insist that an approach towards institutional change and transformation that captures institutional processes is needed (Dacin et al., 2002, p. 45).

Organizational change approach in the literature presents a departure point from a rational perspective which underlines the role of change as a means of efficiency-maximization and better institutional performance. Instead, this approach suggests that institutional change occurs when the institutional characteristics shift as a response to redefined incentive structures and old institutions becoming dysfunctional.

According to Ashworth, Boyne and Delbridge (2007), institutional theory explains this shift as the institutions' need to conform to the expectations of stakeholders and achieving formal legitimacy. Furthermore, instead of viewing technical elements in variation among organizations as the main explanation for organizational change, institutional theory underlines the role of socially and culturally specific practices and socially constituted behaviors on institutional homogeneity and stability.

Similar to rationalists, institutionalists also take centralization and institutional constraints as a critical element of the institutional theory. While the institutional school focuses on top-down hierarchy among individual actors in an institution, the institutional school takes hierarchy among institutions as a driving force for homogeneity in the institutional environment and institutional practices. Thus, it can be seen that there is a clear power asymmetry among two institutions, one exerting pressure on the less powerful organization.

DiMaggio and Powell (1991) mentions that there is a critical departure point between the rational and institutional schools which is the efficiency theory. The efficiency theory suggests that institutions strive to be more efficient in their practices as a result of internal and external pressures of the institutional environment in which they function. These pressures may stem from government agencies and various stakeholders which exert power over organizations to conform to certain patterns of legitimacy. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) state that organizations tend to imitate the organizations that they perceive to be more legitimate or successful. While this suggests that institutions tend to mimic models which they perceive as legitimate, these models can also be inefficient in their nature.

#### **2.1.4 New Institutionalism**

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the first products of this thought of stream emerged as a result of several published papers written by John Meyer and his colleagues such as Brian Rower (1977) and Richard Scott (1983) and Lynne Zucker (1977). Around this time,

institutionalist arguments revolved around the relationship between culture and institutions, rituals, ceremonies, resource dependencies, rational myths and knowledge accumulating; causing a sharp departure point between theories that focus on internal environment of institutions and the impact of external environment on organizations. The new institutionalist theories argued that institutions are deeply integrated in the social and political environment in which they function and this can be seen in the incorporation of practices and procedures that are perceived legitimate by the society (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 343). In other words, the observed conformity to outside institutional rules can be interpreted as reflections of rules, beliefs, and conventions that are ingrained in the higher level structures such as society and culture.

The early works in the institutional literature emphasized the effect of symbolic systems, cultural scripts, and mental models in shaping the institutional practices. However they seemed to be lacking a solid explanation regarding the looming effect of culture and history that were integrated in the society and the ways this effect constrained organizational behavior (Clegg & Bailey, 2008, p. 975).

Subsequent studies were conducted that aimed to explore these mechanisms. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) underlined coercive, mimetic and normatic processes of reproduction which will be explored further in the next section (Clegg & Bailey, 2008, p. 976). Coercive pressures stemmed from political influence, force of the state and overall problem regarding legitimacy which seemed to function with regulatory control and close surveillance (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 150). Normative pressures, on the other hand, found their source in the professionalization and the effect of education (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 150). Finally, mimetic pressures were caused by uncertain situations where the institutional practices became habitual and reflective rather than planned responses to problems (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 150).

Meyer and Rowan (1977) further developed the theory by integrating it to the social structure, explaining the mechanism of myths and ceremonies to establish a sense of legitimacy in the institutional arena. Meyer and Rowan (1977) indicated that institutional environment contains in itself the reflections of myths in formal structures. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) state that this argument is central to the new institutionalist framework and explains this phenomena as follows: "... Rationalized states and other large rational organizations expand their dominance over more arenas of social life, organizational structures increasingly come to reflect rules institutionalized and legitimated by and within the state. As a result, organizations are increasingly homogeneous within given domains and increasingly organized around rituals of conformity to wider institutions" (p. 150).

Another point that is worth mentioning in Meyer and Rowan's (1977) work is the concept of organizational legitimacy. Formal organizations are almost inseparable from complex networks and technical relations within the stream of institutional activity (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 340). However, these organizational structures are highly institutionalized in modern societies which causes them to create and engage in professions, programs and policies, enforcing a system where new institutions can emerge and exerts pressure to the existing organizations to conform to new practices and procedures (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 340). As a result of this, institutions become more and more homogenous and isomorphic with their environment in order to obtain legitimacy.

### **2.1.5 Sociological Institutionalism**

According to the sociological institutionalists, institutions are not just formal rules, procedures and norms; but also the symbols models and norms that shape our perceptions (Hall and Taylor 1996, 947). Sociological institutionalism framework interprets the relationship between institutions and actions in such a way that it is understood within the context of 'roles' in which behavioral norms can be observed. Sociological institutionalism suggests that institutions and

organizations adopt culturally specific models, symbols, and norms not because it is the best solution or the most efficient solution, but rather it enhances the legitimacy and the functional efficiency of the institutions and the actors in it. In other words, institutions adopt specific models and practices because they are valued within the specific cultural context in which the institutions take form (Hall and Taylor 1996, 949). These practices may not be ideal in terms of efficiency and functionality, but they are "appropriate", therefore legitimate. This is called the logic of appropriateness. The logic of appropriateness describes a perspective on the interpretation of human action. Individual and institutional action as well as policy making, is seen as shaped by rules of appropriate or exemplary behavior.

According to this definition of March and Olsen, the logic of appropriateness suggests that the driving force behind actions are rules of appropriate behaviour that are natural, expected and legitimate. Institutions, therefore respond to institutional pressures by adopting practices that will help them obtain legitimacy, which results in increasing similarity between institutions over time.

Given this perspective, the main aim of sociological institutionalists is to understand the reasons behind the adoption of certain institutional forms, procedures, and symbols and the way these organizational practices are converged through organizational fields.

### **2.1.6 Institutional Isomorphism**

Institutions can be defined as systems of rules, beliefs, norms and organizations that impose limitations on agent behavior, establishing what is acceptable and unacceptable, as well as providing positive feedback to particular actors and forming guidelines for acting (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). These guidelines extend to regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive elements (Scott, 2014) supported by formal rules and informal codes of conduct (North, 1990). Organizations function in a given environment, where institutional change occurs as a result of the adoption of new laws, emergence of new standards and implementation of new practices

(Roszkowska-Menkes & Aluchna, 2018). These organizations create an established area of institutional life such as regulatory agencies, product suppliers and consumers and other institutions which serve the same function and offer similar products and services (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148). Organizational fields may exhibit diversity in the early stages of their development, however, once a field is founded, the institutions begin a process of homogenization (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148).

The prominent theory in the literature suggests that the institutional environment has a considerable influence on how organizations, structures, practices and professions develop (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Furthermore, the acceptance of certain practices in organizations create a sense of acceptance and legitimacy which is then used to adapt to competitive pressures. In this sense, this theory suggests that institutions replicate the behavioral norms of other actors in a given organizational field and can be structured through institutional definition. This process consists of four components: “an increase in the extent of interaction among organizations in the field; the emergence of sharply defined interorganizational structures of domination and patterns of coalition; an increase in the information load with which organizations in a field must contend; and the development of a mutual awareness among participants in a set of organizations that they are involved in a common enterprise” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148).

As a result of this process of structurization, a field constituted of a same line of business is established, creating a set of organizational behaviours which serves as a roadmap that determine what is legitimate and appropriate in that given field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148). Although minor changes can be observed as the goals and practices evolve and new organizations emerge, the insitutional environment that function as driving force for orientation and homogeneity, prevents the organizations to change in the long run (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148). According to this theory, it follows that instead of reacting to its own

environment alone, an organization reacts to the responses of an institutional environment which only lessens the level of diversity within the field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Schelling, 1978, p. 14). Underlying this shift is a phenomenon called isomorphism, which is “a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 149).

### **2.1.7 Sustainability and Isomorphic Pressures**

As discussed in the previous sections, institutional perspective emphasizes the importance of ‘legitimacy’ in enabling the adoption of sustainability practices. Following this logic, once they are introduced and reinforced by an appropriate institutional infrastructure, sustainability practices themselves could become institutionalized and reject the prospect of change. Change only happens when the underpinning logics (shared meanings) within organizational fields become contested, the organizational arrangements associated with them are de-legitimized. (Helms et al., 2012; Hiatt et al., 2009).

In order to further the new sociological institutionalism by providing an alternative theoretical explanation for institutional change and isomorphism, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) identified three sources of pressures that uncover the mechanism behind institutional homogeneity. As organizations aim for legitimacy, they respond to similar isomorphic pressures, leading them to adopt similar practices. These pressures towards homogeneity are identified as mimetic, coercive and normative forces. Although these three sources are separate and function with different mechanisms, they are difficult to disentangle and identify empirically (Mizruchi & Fein, 1999), which has consequences for this study in terms of difficulty in observation process.

Mimetic pressures are forces that push organizations to imitate or emulate other organizations’ actions, structures and practices (Ashworth et al., 2007, p. 167). Systems and practices that

may increase the organization's legitimacy are perceived as desirable by the decision-makers, especially in the cases of uncertainty, ambiguity or crisis.

Coercive pressures are associated with laws, regulations, legal requirements and contractual obligations which limits the behavior of organizations and are most often related to political influences (Ashworth et al., 2007, p. 167; Scott, 2014). Scott comments on this power imbalance and suggests that institutional perspective highlights the importance of authority relations, the existence of legitimate coercion (1987, p. 502).

Normative pressures are associated with professional standards and they exert indirect pressure on organizations to conform to standards of professionalism and to adopt practices and operations considered to be legitimate by professional groupings (Ashworth et al., 2007, p. 167). These norms are communicated through professional bodies.

## **2.2 Empirical Expectations**

### **Sources of Isomorphic Pressures as Drivers of Sustainability**

The literature offers different opinions regarding the sources of isomorphism as well as their respective relationship with sustainability (Amran & Haniffa, 2011; Rika, 2009). According to the institutional isomorphism theory, coercive isomorphism occurs as a result of pressures exerted by the government, society and other institutions. The degree of coercive isomorphism depends on the following: government regulations, industry relations and regulations that involve norms and pressures stemming from societal expectations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Horak et al., 2018; Oliver, 1991; Rosenzweig & Singh, 1991). Thus, based on the dominant ideas found in the literature, it could be proposed that sustainability regulations imposed by the government, stakeholders and societal norms/expectations increase the level of coercive pressure for adopting sustainable practices.

Mimetic isomorphism can be described as the imitation of certain practices as a response to uncertainty and ambiguity, and it has a positive relationship with the extent of relationship oriented socialization (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Horak et al., 2018, p. 533). Based on the theoretical explanations found in the literature, the following can be expected: The level of mimetic isomorphism for sustainable practices is positively affected by the relationships with other socially responsible organizations and stakeholders, the cultural values of the alliance organizations and lastly, the need for keeping up a positive image and reputation.

Normative isomorphism is defined as pressure to comply with professional standards and it is mainly affected by expectations in the field to conform to standards of professionalism (Horak et al., 2018, p. 533). As such, based on the literature, the following can be expected: The level of normative isomorphism is positively influenced by the professional values of the institution and exposure to sustainable awareness.

Overall, the following is hypothesized:

H1: Isomorphic pressures will be positively related to the adoption of sustainable practices.

Table 2 offers an overview of the empirical expectations for isomorphic pressures and their influence on sustainability.

**Table 2**  
**Institutional Factors in Exerting Isomorphic Pressure**

	<b>Coercive Isomorphism</b>	<b>Mimetic Isomorphism</b>	<b>Normative Isomorphism</b>
<b>Pressure from the government</b>	X		
<b>Pressure within the institution</b>	X		
<b>Relationship oriented socialization/networks</b>		X	

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<b>Competitiveness</b>	X
<b>Institutional values</b>	X

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**Source: Authors**



## CHAPTER 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this section, information regarding the research method, the research approach, the method of data collection, selection of the cases, process of data analysis and the research limitations of the study will be presented.

### 3.1 Approach

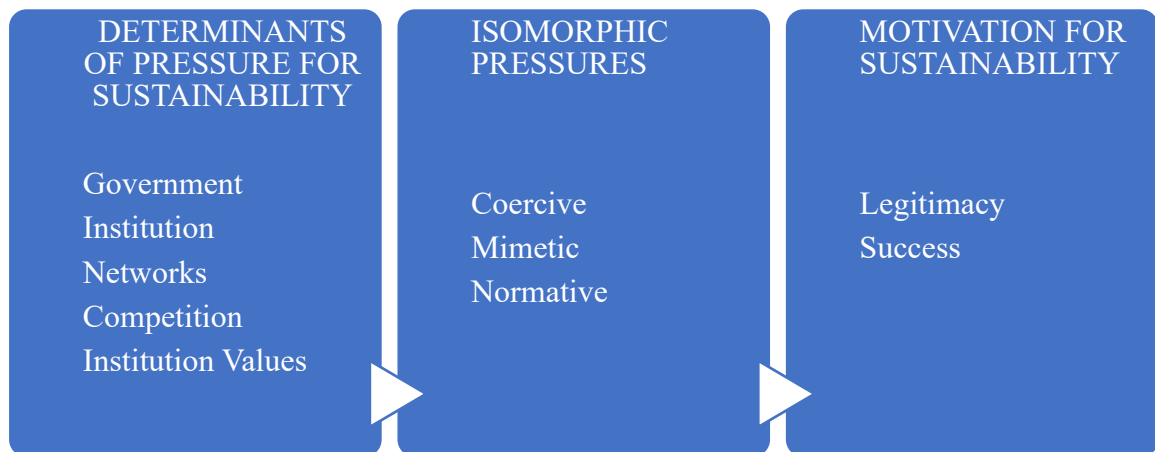
This study makes use of an explanatory qualitative multiple case study methodology consisting of document analysis, review of institutional sustainability records, mission statements and annual reports of Dutch higher education institutions. In line with new sociological institutionalism theory, this study aims to explore the dynamics between institutional pressures and their effect on the implementation of sustainable practices in higher education organizations. It proposes that as a result of isomorphic pressures, Dutch higher education institutions are becoming more sustainable in terms of their efforts and practices. As mentioned previously, the significance of this study lies in its ability to fill the gap in the literature by combining the higher education institutions and sustainable development.

A common issue with the institutionalist perspectives is the difficulty of identifying institutional settings and arrangements accurately and in a detailed manner, especially in the higher education literature which can be considered highly scarce. Not all cases of isomorphic pressures can be measured by quantitative measures, and for this reason, the utilization a qualitative design made this multiple case study a good fit with this area of research. Furthermore, due to the lack of existing literature that capsulates both sustainability and isomorphic pressures in the context of higher education institutions, a qualitative design made more sense since it allows for a more flexible and inductive approach. As Creswell (2013) describes, the qualitative case design offers detailed, in-

depth data collection involving multiple sources of information, analysis and data collection methods. In order to grasp the intricacies of institutional arrangements of higher education institutions and capturing a holistic understanding of isomorphic pressures within such a narrowed context, this study uses the guidelines of Stake (1995, 2005), Merriam (1988), and Yin (2009).

### **3.2 Research Framework**

Sustainability efforts and practices involve building linkages and interdependencies among organizations in a given institutional environment. While these institutions may adhere to different values and operate on different models of practices, they tend to adopt similar behaviours as an effort to gain acceptance and legitimacy. Consequently, the motivation for incorporating and initiating sustainable practices remain a critical point of discussion. Based on the insights offered by the institutional theory literature discussed earlier, this homogeneity between organizations requires the presence of institutional pressures that affect the willingness of organizations to undertake sustainability initiatives (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). As discussed in the earlier chapter, three forms of institutional pressures are identified: mimetic, coercive and normative pressures, which are the independent variables in this study. By utilizing this particular view in institutional perspective, this study is built on a research model that was extracted from the theory, focusing on coercive, normative and mimetic forces as institutional pressures that affect the adoption of sustainable practices. The dependent variable is the adoption of sustainable practices. Figure 1 offers an outline of the conceptual framework and theoretical mechanism of this study. The research framework is shown in the Figure 1 which shows the impact of three types of institutional pressures on the adoption of sustainable practices, as well as the determinants of these pressures. In this model, institutional pressures are presented as independent variables that motivates the organizations to incorporate and initiate sustainable practices.



**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework**

### **3.3 Data Operationalization**

In this section, the dependent and independent variables and how they were operationalized are discussed. The first measure I operationalized was the sustainable practices. I have decided to focus on environmental sustainability only, leaving the social and economic sustainability out of the scope of this study since it is too large to address in this research.

#### **3.3.1 Dependent Variables**

##### **Sustainable Practices**

For each organization, sustainable practices were evaluated through content analysis. A search using the official websites of the organizations was performed in order to obtain text data with the mention of following terms: sustainability, environmental plan, Green Office, sustainable practices. Clustering these practices for the two higher education organizations resulted in the following categories: (1) Energy, (2) Water, (3) Waste, (4) Sustainable procurement and investments, (5) Education and research and (6) Mobility. Table 3

presents the sustainability criteria of the organizations. What is assessed as a sustainable practice is described as follows: any and all regulations as well as strategies related to environmental issues, presence of social and political responsibility regarding sustainability management, mentions of administrative structures with relation to sustainability, activities and events that aim to improve sustainability, annual short and long-term objectives based on improving sustainability and the state of fulfilment of these objectives.

### **3.3.2 Independent Variables**

#### **Pressures**

As discussed in the theoretical chapter, three forms of institutional pressures are identified: coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures. For the purpose of making comparisons where necessary, this study also evaluates the level of the pressures.

Retrieved from the Environmental Policy Plans of two institutions, the About Us section in the institution webpages, specifically focusing on Vision, Mission and Sustainability sections, all behaviors and interventions from the government and the organizations themselves that could directly change the room for agency for higher education organizations through coercion are coded as coercive pressure (+1). This would mean that coercive pressure is understood as the possibility of penalization as a result of non-compliance. This form of pressure is operationalized as power, in the form of government mandates, regulations as well as regulations of the organization itself. The total coercive pressure of an organization is the sum of the two.

All information that referred to the behavior or performance of other higher education organizations with regard to sustainable practices and relationship oriented socialization with other socially responsible organizations were coded as mimetic pressure (+1).

Institutional theory assumes that organizations tend to mimic each other in order to maintain legitimacy. An example of this would be the mention of sustainable practices in other higher education organizations. This could be any form of information that implicates the presence of competition, alliance, ranking and ideal practices. It could also be the mention of networks or work groups that create an area for relationship oriented socialization and information-sharing which would promote certain organizational behaviours. The total mimetic pressure of an organization is the sum of the two.

Professional normative pressure is related to professionalization and was operationalized as all information that points to standards of professionalism, norms, standards, institutional values and best practices for sustainable practices in the educational field.

Table 4 presents an overview of the isomorphic pressures and the factors that are causing them. These pressures are mainly derived from the literature, however, they are extracted from the documents that were reviewed in order to determine the pressures on the adoption of sustainable practices within the higher education institutions.

**TABLE 3**  
**Sustainability Criteria**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Source</b>
<b>Sustainable Practices</b>	Energy	HEI 1 Environmental Policy Plan 2016-2020.
	Water	
	Waste	
	Sustainable procurement and investments	HEI 2 webpage, 'Sustainable Operations' section.
	Education and research	
	Mobility	

**TABLE 4**  
**Institutional Isomorphic Pressures**

Main Variable	Factor	Operationalization
Coercive pressures	Pressures from the government in the form of regulation and mandates  Pressures from the HEI itself	All behaviors of the government and the organizations themselves that could directly decrease the room for agency.
Normative pressures	Institutional Values  Standards and norms of professionalism	All information that points to standards of professionalism, norms, standards, institutional values and best practices for sustainable practices in the educational field.
Mimetic pressures	Competition  Pressures from networks/work groups	All information that referred to the behavior or performance of other higher education organizations with regard to sustainable practices and relationship oriented socialization with other socially responsible organizations.

### 3.4 Selection of the Cases

Two higher education institutions were selected: HEI 1 and HEI 2, both being part of the Dutch university field with similar characteristics. Since the aim of the study is to identify two similar organizations in terms of sustainability efforts, two organizations that have active sustainability reporting and similar sustainability levels were selected. For the purpose of feasibility, the following criteria was taken into account: the higher education

institution to provide the possibility to understand the phenomenon studied, possibility of establishing contact and finding informants if necessary, and finally, possibility of encountering similar isomorphic pressures.

This implies that the sampling is non-random or non-probability. One of the examples of non-random sampling is purposive sampling in which the selection carries a judgement or a representative quality. Since the aim of this study is to explore the phenomenon of institutional isomorphism within the small sample of two Dutch public higher education institutions, and the generalization is not possible, sample bias does not carry relevance.

**TABLE 5**

**Description of the Sample Organizations**

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Nature</b>	<b>Organizational Field</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Sustainability Level</b>	<b>Sustainability Reporting</b>
HEI 1	Public	Higher Education	Leiden, Netherlands	High	Annual
HEI 2	Public	Higher Education	Amsterdam, Netherlands	High	Annual

### **3.5 Data Collection**

Institutional documents and records, including annual sustainability reports, mission statements and official webpages of the higher education institutions will be analyzed in a detailed manner and reviewed in order to determine the sources of isomorphic pressures, and the extent of sustainable practices.

Document analysis is an analytical research procedure which is mainly used in qualitative research and it requires the examination and interpretation of data to be done in order to elicit deeper meaning and empirical knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Rapley, 2007). The analytic procedure is a combination of methods such as detecting, choosing, interpreting, and synthesizing data and the obtained findings are then organized to fit the theory and case of the choice by content analysis (Labuschagne, 2003).

As it fits to the qualitative design of the study, document analysis method was preferred since it can enable the researcher to conduct intensive studies producing rich descriptions of a single phenomenon such as isomorphic pressure (Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994).

While doing so, institutional theory was utilized in order to explore and explain the source and impact of institutional pressures on the adoption of sustainable practices. In order to determine the source of these pressures, official sustainability and environmental reports and of the institutions will be analyzed. The data were collected by means of the content analysis retrieved from the publicly available information on the internet for these 2 institutions.

### **3.6 Data Analysis**

In accordance with the institutional isomorphism theory of DiMaggio and Powell (1983), first, two categories were mapped out: 1) sustainable practices and 2) institutional pressures. This first step provided a general framework to structurize the study.

Firstly, the level of sustainability of the organizations were operationalized and measured through searching for the following criteria: (1) Energy, (2) Water, (3) Waste, (4) Sustainable procurement and investments, (5) Education and Research and (6) Mobility. Table 6 offers a summary of the sustainable practices based on this criteria.

One problem that was encountered was to measure the information content of environmental plans and sustainability strategies published online by the higher education organizations. To overcome this oversight, a simple index was created. An index is an instrument widely preferred in qualitative research design, created to measure a cluster of items which, when aggregated, give a total relative score indicative of the level of these items for which the index was designed (Bengtsson, 2016; Bloor & Wood, 2006; Salvador, 2016). The index methodology is utilized commonly in the literature to measure the information content of annual and sustainability reports or strategic plans published by organizations.

In order to achieve an accurate measurement, a scale of sustainability index with three levels was created: high, moderate and low. If the results of the document analysis indicated the presence of sustainable practices for all six criterias that were mentioned previously, that organization was placed to the high sustainability category. If the organization did not fulfill at least half of the criterias, that organization was placed to the low sustainability category. The organizations that fulfilled half or more than half of the criterias were designated as moderate sustainability.

In the next step of the analysis, the webpages of the institutions using the 'About Us' or 'About the University' pages as well as the Environmental Plans were used as primary sources in order to pinpoint the causes of institutional pressures. Following this, a scale of isomorphic pressures with three levels was created: high, moderate and low. The organizations that fulfill all the factors under a certain type of pressure were placed to the high isomorphic pressure category. If an organization fulfilled none of the factors under a certain type of pressure, that organization was designated as low isomorphic pressure, and those that experienced one or two of the factors were categorized as moderate isomorphic pressure. For normative pressures, If an organization fulfilled none of the factors under a

certain type of pressure, it was placed to the low isomorphic pressure category, and those that experienced one or more factors was placed to the high isomorphic pressure category.

After determining the levels of sustainability and isomorphic pressures for coercive, mimetic and normatic pressures, the findings were analyzed and discussed.

### **3.7 Validity and Reliability**

In order to ensure the validity and objectivity, this study has utilized methods mainly used in case studies such as construct validity, external validity and reliability (Bengtsson, 2016; Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999; Yin, 1994). Based on the theoretical framework from literature review, the relevant topics and possible key themes and words were extracted from the text data. In terms of construct validity, a rigorous review of the literature was conducted to define the variables to study isomorphic pressures and theory was heavily used to design the coding scheme. When the right combination of indicators are encountered, the occurrence is marked and coded as the positive presence of isomorphic pressures. With regards to external validity, cases were selected with prior knowledge about the phenomenon studied and the concept of analytical generalization was used and the scope of the study was focused on the national context, particularly Dutch higher education organizations. Unlike statistical generalization, this method generalizes from particulars to larger constructs or theory which is one of the most preferred methods used in qualitative research (Polit & Beck, 2010).

With regards to reliability, this study presents a drawback that can be associated with the content analysis research, which is the lack of a generalized index for measuring isomorphic pressures. In future research, an index could be derived and utilized in order to increase reliability.

## CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

This research investigates the effect of institutional pressures the adoption of sustainable practices in higher education institutions. In this section, findings regarding the adoption of sustainable practices and the influence of isomorphic pressures on undertaking sustainability initiatives will be presented. Data were collected from Environmental Policy Plans of two institutions, the About Us section in the institution webpages, specifically focusing on Vision, Mission and Sustainability sections. Content analysis was utilized to identify key words, patterns and themes.

In this section, findings regarding the sources of three isomorphic pressures in relation to sustainability will be presented, which were outlined in the literature review. In order to maintain anonymity, we will refer to the institutions as HEI 1 and HEI 2. The information summarized in this chapter is extracted from the respective environmental reports and policy plans which are publicly available in the webpages of the institutions. Table 6 shows the presence of the items for measuring the extent to which Dutch universities incorporate sustainable practices that were discussed in the Methods chapter. Finally, Table 7 shows us the extent of isomorphic pressures experienced by each organization. Subsequently, the findings outlined in this chapter will provide a basis for discussion and conclusion.

### **4.1 Presence of Sustainable Practices**

As previously mentioned in the Methodology chapter, Table 6 shows the criteria for sustainable practices. According to this criteria which was derived from the literature, presence of sustainable practices incorporated by both higher education organizations seemed to indicate a high level of sustainability. After the examination of sustainability strategies of both organizations, it was found that all items in the criteria were fulfilled, indicating a similarity or a convergence of sustainable practices between the two

organizations. This result indicates a certain level of homogeneity between two similar organizations which provides the ideal conditions to examine the effects of normative, coercive and mimetic pressures respectively.

Although this analysis would work ideally with a field-level focus, where the organizational field of Dutch higher education could be examined with its entirety, it is the author's view that a qualitative study utilizing this framework would be too laboursome. However, based on the results that all the indicators produced evidence of high levels of sustainability and similarity, theoretically it can be claimed that sustainability practices in these criterias habitualized themselves and therefore, became institutionalized. It should be noted that this is an exaggeration of the isomorphic change model, and one of the reasons why the theory has been the target of criticism in the literature.

**TABLE 6****Sustainability Criteria and Overall Assessment of Sustainable Practices**

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>HEI 1</b>	<b>HEI 2</b>
<b>Energy</b>	Publicly available in English. Set out clear targets. Reducing energy consumption. Generating sustainable energy.	Publicly available in English. Set out clear targets. Reducing energy consumption. Generating sustainable energy.
<b>Water</b>	Publicly available in English. Set out clear targets. Reducing water consumption.	Publicly available in Dutch. Set out clear targets. Reducing water consumption.
<b>Waste</b>	Publicly available in English. Set out clear targets. Reducing waste production. Waste separation.	Publicly available in English. Set out clear targets. Reducing waste production. Waste separation.
<b>Sustainable procurement</b>	Publicly available in English. Set out clear targets. Sustainable criteria for procurement and investments.	Publicly available in English. Set out clear targets. Sustainable criteria for procurement and investments.
<b>Education and Research</b>	Publicly available in English. No clear targets. Integration of sustainability in study programmes.	Publicly available in English. Set out clear targets. Integration of sustainability in study programmes.
<b>Mobility</b>	Publicly available in English. Set out clear targets.	Publicly available in Dutch. No clear targets.
<b>Sustainability Level</b>	High	High

**Sources: HEI 1 Environmental Policy Plan 2016-2020. HEI 2 Webpage 'About Us'.**

#### **4.2 Presence of Isomorphic Pressures**

After establishing the homogeneity of sustainable practices between two organizations, , Table 7 shows the experienced sources of isomorphic pressures for both organizations in

general terms. The following sections will demonstrate the sources of isomorphic pressures that influence the incorporation of sustainable policies.

#### **4.2.1 Coercive Pressures**

Coercive pressures are exerted by an organization in which the former is dependent on the other. The extent of dependency may affect the level of isomorphism. For instance, a dependent relationship formed with government regulatory bodies may use coercion as a policy instrument, which leaves the possibility of non-compliance very slim. In this case, the state functions as a coercive mechanism by determining the desired sustainable practices through direct forces such as policy and legislation. In this sense, the coercive forces influencing both higher education organizations have a national dimension, accomplished through the previously mentioned channels. Before presenting the individual pressures each organization face, the following few paragraphs will discuss the standardized procedures and behaviors that are legitimized by the state, creating a common environment that affects the behavior and the structure of both organizations.

Based on the content analysis, it can be seen that the national government exerts considerable amount of pressure through regulations on both higher education organizations. Almost all national legislation on the environment is covered in the Environmental Management Act, which offers a legal framework by defining the roles of national, provincial or regional, and municipal government. According to the Environmental Management Act, the following are regulated: “municipal waste collection, disposal of discarded equipment, permits for hazardous waste shipment, Environmental quality criteria for emissions, construction of major infrastructure, environmental permits.” (Environmental Management Act). The Human Environment and Transport Inspectorate is largely responsible for enforcing the provisions, as well as the municipalities, the police

and the justice system (Environmental Management Act). Therefore, non-compliance poses a risk to the survival of the organization which will result in a penalty.

Similarly, The Activities Decree (Activiteitenbesluit) and the Activities Regulations (Activiteitenregeling) which regulate about 100 activities regarding environmental aspects, puts considerable pressure on organizations and especially all companies in the Netherlands rules (*All-in-One Permit for Environmental Regulations for Businesses*, n.d.). Overall, it functions as follows: The Activities Decree contains regulations mainly regarding environmentally harmful activities and sets goals for environmental aspects such as soil, waister, air, water, and safety. The Activities Regulations accommodate the means for compliance, such as the techniques to be used and other requirements, which some of are the direct implementation of EU legislation. However, it should be noted that it is possible to deviate from the rules of the Activities Decree with customized rules (*All-in-One Permit for Environmental Regulations for Businesses*, n.d.).

Third Long-Term Agreement on Energy Efficiency (MJA3) also exerts an pressure on organizations in more than 30 sectors regarding energy efficiency and use of renewable energy. (EPATEE, n.d.) In the case of higher education organizations, this mainly regulates activities regarding sustainable purchasing. In 2008 all Dutch universities participated in a covenant with the then Ministry of the Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment (VROM) with the goal that by 2012 at least 50% of their procurement would meet the sustainability criteria set by the Ministry. These criteria set out the minimum requirements regarding the purchasing of products in a sustainable manner (*Procurement and Investments*, n.d.). While it is true that the policy instrument utilized here is a cooperative one with voluntary agreements, the organizational change occurs as a result of pressures from the government in the form of a decree by also exerting an indirect pressure exercised within the organization. Hence, the role of government as well as the role of institutional

government (higher education organizations themselves) functions as sources of pressure on institutionalized norms and practices.

Finally, 'nearly Zero Energy' (nZEB) requires all new buildings in the EU to be zero energy starting from 2020. Nearly Zero-Energy building regulations are incorporated into Dutch legislation of the EU Member States, and affects higher education organizations as well as every organization involved in construction and renovation in the Netherlands (*Nearly Zero Energy Buildings*, n.d.). Non-compliance with the rule causes higher costs in the long term and the building owners are faced with the possibility of value reduction or losing the competitive position of the building (*Nearly Zero Energy Buildings*, n.d.). In this case, the coercive pressure arises from perceived problems regarding the environmental costs of construction. This regulation demonstrates the shift towards the institutionalization of sustainable construction in Dutch higher education organizations due to power dynamics between the government and the dependent organization.

In terms of coercive pressures exerted by the organizations themselves, both organizations have voluntarily participated in covenants and set out sustainability goals with a time schedule. This is an example of an overt relationship or subtle pressure in which an organization feels responsible to adopt certain practices for the sake of gaining legitimacy. The following sections will demonstrate the sources of isomorphic pressures in a detailed manner, using direct quotes as evidence.

### **Presence of Coercive Pressures in HEI 1**

Content analysis was conducted regarding experienced pressure from “powerful” organizations in which the institution is dependent on. Documents were reviewed with the aim of finding the sources of these pressures and whether they held any power and authority over the adoption of sustainable practices within the institution. Following this, two main sources were identified: (1) pressure from the government and (2) pressure from the institution itself.

The content analysis indicated that the pressures from the government positively influenced the adoption of sustainable practices. The following quotes from the Environmental Policy Plan 2016-2020 illustrates the strong presence of coercive pressure on the HEI 1:

Q1: “The topics included in the various themes are covered by extensive legislation. In this context, the Environmental Management Act is important for the University, and the Activities Decree, which is based on this Act, provides general rules for the office buildings, for instance. The University also has Environmental Permits for some laboratory buildings” (*Environmental Policy Plan 2016-2020*, n.d., p. 5).

Q2: “In addition to the legal framework, Leiden University is also party to a number of long-term covenants. One of these is the third Long-Term Agreement on Energy Efficiency (MJA3), which commits the University to improving its energy efficiency by 2% per year until 2020” (*Environmental Policy Plan 2016-2020*, n.d., p. 5).

Q3: “Another example is the covenants concluded with the government through the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) in the area of sustainable procurement” (*Environmental Policy Plan 2016-2020*, n.d., p. 5).

Q4: “The University will actively work within the terms of the Energy Agreement for Sustainable Growth, signed by the Dutch government, societal institutions and commercial parties. This agreement encourages organisations to increase their energy efficiency and proportion of sustainable energy” (*Environmental Policy Plan 2016-2020*, n.d., p. 8).

Q5: “HEI 1 complies with the (EU) tendering rules in its procurement. An EU tendering procedure must be used for the procurement of all goods and services with a value above € 207,000, and the criteria for sustainable procurement are also applied” (*Environmental Policy Plan 2016-2020*, n.d., p. 15)

Q6: “The University’s procurement has been fully compliant with the Ministry’s covenant since 2012: in all cases where criteria have been set, they are applied by the University.” (*Environmental Policy Plan 2016-2020*, n.d., p. 15).

From this information, it became clear that explicit and direct coercive pressures were received by the institution. These pressures were experienced through a set of legal framework which forced the institution to behave and structure its operations in a certain way in terms of incorporating sustainable policies. This signifies that the regulatory forces of the government in the institutional environment gives rise to a constrained choice behaviour limited by asymmetrical dependencies and power relations between two organizations.

The other source of coercive pressure was the institution itself, which is a more subtle form of coercive pressure. This pressure from the within occurs when an organization feels

compelled to adopt certain practices in order to appear legitimate or competitive (“Isomorphism,” 2010). The evidence of this can be seen in the voluntary participation of the institution in Third Long-Term Agreement on Energy Efficiency (MJA3) and the covenant on sustainable procurement, both requiring participation on a voluntary basis. Although the voluntary nature of the regulations imply coercive pressure from the institution itself, it should be noted that they also pose a legal obligation, therefore needs to be considered a source of pressure from the government as well.

The other coercive pressure factor was the goals and ambition the institution itself set and monitored. This implicit pressure was identified through the Environmental Policy Plan, which could be highlighted by the following quotes:

Q7: “Key performance indicators (KPIs) will be established for implementing the Environmental Policy Plan, so that the results of each action can be monitored. The progress in terms of the KPIs will be collected and analysed on a structural basis, in order to reveal trends. A concise report of this progress will be given in HEI 1’s Health, Safety and Environment Annual Report, which is produced by the HSE Department. After each cycle, a management review and improvement plan are produced with the aim of improving the system” (*Environmental Policy Plan 2016-2020*, n.d., p. 30).

Q8: “By the end of 2016, HEI 1 will have conducted a baseline measurement for BREEAM-NL In-Use for all (relevant) buildings” (*Environmental Policy Plan 2016-2020*, n.d., p. 35).

Q9: “From 2016, at least the BREEAM-NL Very Good rating will be achieved for the demolition of buildings” (*Environmental Policy Plan 2016-2020*, n.d., p. 35).

Q10: "HEI 1 will participate in 'Join the Pipe' and install tap water stations in all its buildings" (*Environmental Policy Plan 2016-2020*, n.d., p. 35).

Q11: "HEI 1 will take the initiative to encourage all Dutch universities to formulate sustainability criteria for product groups where national criteria have not yet been set" (*Environmental Policy Plan 2016-2020*, n.d., p. 36).

Q12: "Each year the amount of waste per HEI 1 student will be reduced, to a maximum of 25 kilos per student in 2020" (*Environmental Policy Plan 2016-2020*, n.d., p. 36).

Q13: "From no later than 2018, the Centre for Sustainability will offer a course on 'integrating the theme of sustainability in existing curricula' for interested teaching staff" (*Environmental Policy Plan 2016-2020*, n.d., p. 37).

Q14: "No later than 2018, one or more workshops will be held in the Lorentz Center to explore how research in the area of the environment and sustainability can be developed further" (*Environmental Policy Plan 2016-2020*, n.d., p. 37).

Based on these results, it could be said that the presence of coercive pressures were evidenced in this case, given that both the government and the institution itself exerted pressure to institutionalize certain sustainable practices and behaviours.

### **Presence of Coercive Pressures in HEI 2**

Similarly, the content analysis revealed the presence of explicit pressures placed on the institution by the government, experienced in the form of legal frameworks and requirements. The main source of data was the institution's webpage, specifically the "About Us" section.

The following quote illustrates the pressure from the government to adopt zero energy building polices:

Q14: “From 1 January 2020, all utility buildings in the Netherlands must meet the requirements for ‘nearly Zero Energy Buildings’. HEI 2 strives to meet or surpass these requirements in its new buildings and renovation work. For example, (...) HEI 2 is constructing a new, energy-neutral building to house Informatics” (*Sustainable Operational Management*, n.d.).

It can be clearly seen that the nZEB regulation is viewed by the institution as a driving force for action. Through mechanisms of regulation and legislation, the internal decision-making process with regards to campus management is influenced and constrained. Dutch government is a powerful stakeholder that exerts pressure through legislation, regulation and policies. ‘Nearly Zero Energy Buildings’, for example, are the result of the government interest in sustainable construction. The coercive pressure for the institutionalization of this practice is codified through the nZEB regulation.

The content analysis indicated further proof for the presence of coercive pressures in the form of unequal dependence between the parties. The nature of asymmetrical dependencies among organizations limits the institutional operations and force them to comply with the demands of a more powerful institution. This can also be evidenced in the following quotes from the institution's webpage:

Q15: “We are working with the municipality to develop an underground heat and cold storage system that will reduce CO2 emissions by the University and its urban partners” (*Sustainable Operational Management*, n.d.).

Q16: “Working with local government and businesses, the UvA is carrying out an original and ambitious series of sustainability projects” (*Sustainable Operational Management*, n.d.).

Similar to HEI 1, the second source of pressure was the pressures exerted within the institution, which HEI 2 seems to fulfill. The content analysis revealed text data which can be regarded as evidence for the active role of HEI 2 as a self-motivator for improving sustainability. Focusing on the within institution dimension (Q17 and Q18), the self-initiated leadership role that was overtaken by the institution signifies the presence of coercive pressure within the institution. The perceived leadership role of the HEI 2 becomes a significant driver for change when the organization decides to institutionalize their legacy in order to become legitimized.

Q17: “As a public institution, we need to lead by example. We have set out a number of key sustainability targets that fit with our institutional profile as a university” (*Sustainable Operational Management*, n.d.).

Q18: “HEI 2 aims to become a pioneer in the field of sustainability” (*Sustainable Operational Management*, n.d.).

Q19: “We are working to apply government criteria for sustainable procurement, including social procurement” (*Sustainable Operational Management*, n.d.).

Finally, content analysis showed that HEI 2, similar to HEI 1, also participates in the sustainable procurement covenant (Q19) on a voluntary basis. This finding relates back to the aspects related to the coercive isomorphism within the institution.

#### **4.2.2 Mimetic Pressures**

The literature argues that learning networks and competitiveness will positively influence the degree of incorporation of sustainable practices and cause them to model themselves after each other (Horak et al., 2018; Segalàs et al., 2008). With regards to mimetic pressures, the results indicate that by demonstrating evidence for the presence of network groups and competitiveness, both organizations have experienced high levels of mimetic pressure.

One drawback of this measurement was the lack of variance in the sustainability level, which may have given us empirical evidence that organizations that face with uncertainty model their practices to replicate a successful and more sustainable organization. In order to investigate the mimetic pressures, the following sections will utilize content analysis for both organizations.

#### **Presence of Mimetic Pressures in HEI 1**

Mimetic pressure tends to arise when the organizations model themselves after other organizations in the same field, particularly large, successful and powerful ones. Based on this concept, it can be said that mimetic pressure is positively influenced by the levels of relationship oriented socialization such as networks and groups which will activate the imitation behaviour of an organization. Based on this logic, content analysis was conducted in order to determine whether there were pressures from networks on the adoption of

sustainable policies. The justification behind this is that if organizations had strong alliance partners with a strong orientation on sustainability, the level of mimetic pressure would increase. This would in turn influence the adoption of sustainable practices.

The first finding was the presence of Green Office (Q20), which was set up at 2006 with the aim of raising awareness and increasing the involvement of students and staff in the practices and operations regarding sustainability (*Environmental Policy Plan 2016-2020*, n.d., p. 3).

While the Green Office increases the involvement of university community, staff and students, it also presents a model example for the other institutions, triggering an imitation behaviour of institutions. The following statement (Q21) illustrates the pressure to imitate the best environmental practices and sustainability practices, creating a learning environment between institutions that operate in the same organizational field:

Q20: "HEI 1 Green Office is not only doing their utmost best to create awareness of and knowledge about sustainability among university students and staff, but also contribute to the reduction of the ecological footprint of the university" (*Green Office*, n.d.).

Q21: "Several universities in the Netherlands have already set up a Green Office or are in the process of doing so. The University of Applied Sciences Leiden has had a 'pop up Green Office' since 2015" (*Environmental Policy Plan 2016-2020*, n.d., p. 29).

The second finding was the presence of a network called Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU). According to the mission statement of VSNU (Q22), this network of universities create a platform for exchanging information about the practices of the

institutions. The following sentence highlights the role of VSNU as an initiator of behavior imitation:

(Q22): “The VSNU office supports these goals by unlocking figures and data about the university sector, by providing a platform for knowledge exchange, by informing universities about the political realities in The Hague, by lobbying towards national politics and by fulfilling the role of employer” (*Vision and Mission*, n.d.).

Moreover, the expectation that organizations that were in alliance with strong partners and networks would positively affect the level of mimetic pressure in the circumstances of organizational uncertainty was evidenced with this statement:

Q23: “HEI 1 intends to make the procurement of goods and services even more sustainable. In 2018 the University will apply sustainability criteria to all procurement segments for which this is possible. Where the Ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment has not yet made sustainability criteria available, HEI 1 will set its own criteria, working in conjunction with the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU)” (*Environmental Policy Plan 2016-2020*, n.d., p. 16).

This poses an evidence that this shared community where a network of people, resources and discussion enabled organizational copying and imitating to a certain extent.

Since mimetic pressure is associated with imitation of better and more successful institutions, the second source of mimetic pressure was competition. The content analysis showed the presence of a competition source in the form of ranking. The SustainaBul is a prize awarded to the most sustainable higher education institution in the Netherlands, in

which 30 universities are ranked according to the following criteria: (1) education, (2) research, (3) business operations and (4) best practices (*Sustainabul*, n.d.).

The following statement (Q24) indicates that SustainaBul ranking prescribes a model format to the institution, creating an incentive to incorporate sustainable practices in order to attain legitimacy:

(Q24): "HEI 1 has come 20th in the annual SustainaBul ranking. This position, a drop compared to last year, highlights which will require particular attention in the University's new sustainability vision" (*SustainaBul Ranking*, n.d.).

Based on these results, it could be said that the presence of mimetic pressures were evidenced in this case, given that the content analysis indicated relationship oriented socialization such as networks and groups and the imitation behaviour of the organization.

### **Presence of Mimetic Pressures in HEI 2**

Based on the previously mentioned justification, content analysis was conducted in order to determine whether there were pressures from networks on the adoption of sustainable policies. Similar to HEI 1, the first finding was the presence of Green Office (Q25, Q26). Mimetic isomorphism has also been evidenced in the case of HEI 2, given that the content analysis revealed the presence of other institutions that have established Green Offices, as well as partner organizations. This suggests that adoption of a Green Office in HEI 2 have been followed to take actions based on the set actions of other organizations in the higher education field. While the Green Office increases the involvement of university community, staff and students, it also collaborates with external partners, which may create learning behavior and trigger imitation of behaviour of other organizations (Q27, Q28).

Similar to HEI 1, the second finding was the presence of a network called Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU). As previously mentioned, according to the mission statement of VSNU, this network of universities create a platform for exchanging information regarding the practices of the institutions (Q29).

Q25: “Established in 2016, the Green Office has continuously increased its output of policy recommendations and projects to accelerate the sustainable transition at the HEI 2, especially with respect to environmental sustainability” (*About Us | Green Office*, n.d.).

Q26: “We build a community and channel the efforts of students, staff, and partner organizations to influence policy at the university” (*About Us | Green Office*, n.d.).

Q27: “The Community team leader engages HEI 2 staff and students in community building events and fostering awareness and sustainable behavior. This is done in coordination with external partners (*Semi-Annual Report 2019/20*, n.d., p. 6) ”.

Q28: “The team aimed to strengthen the Green Office’s links with both external and internal stakeholders, focusing on a strengthening of internal communication channels and flows in particularly” (*Semi-Annual Report 2019/20*, n.d.).

Q29: “Two to three times each year, all members of the Executive Boards of the universities meet in the General Assembly. This meeting focuses on determining the joint strategy, which is aimed at increasing and maintaining the quality of academic education and research and its impact on society” (*General Assembly*, n.d.)

The second source of mimetic pressure was competition. The content analysis showed the presence of a competition source in the form of ranking. The SustainaBul is a prize awarded

to the most sustainable higher education institution in the Netherlands, in which 30 universities are ranked according to the following criteria: (1) education, (2) research, (3) business operations and (4) best practices (*Sustainabul*, n.d.).

The following statement indicates that SustainaBul ranking prescribes a model format to the institution, creating an incentive to incorporate sustainable practices in order to attain legitimacy:

Q30: "HEI 2 Green Office will support sustainability projects by students, staff and researchers. It will also execute its own projects and those commissioned by the HEI 2. The Sustainabul rankings and the annual evaluation of the Carbon Footprint, for example, are two projects that will be looked at by the HEI 2 Green Office" (Green Office to Spur Sustainability, 2016).

#### **4.2.3 Normative Pressures**

Normative pressures are related to professionalization and were operationalized as all statements and text data extracted from the university websites regarding dedication and efforts to sustainability. The claims of these organizations represent the norms, standards, and best practices for sustainable practices that habitualized themselves in the professional field. The dedication to sustainability was extracted from the Values and Missions of the organizations in order to show the professional values of the organizations. Normative isomorphism was intended to be measured through examination of the choice of language when referring to values of the organizations. While both organizations include sustainability as part of their values and mission statements, one limitation of this criteria is the difficulty to measure normative pressures based on content analysis.

#### **Presence of Normative Pressures in HEI 1**

Examples of normative pressures that influence adoption of sustainable practices appeared to be targeted at the institutional level, specifically institutional professional values as it is influenced by expectations to adhere to norms and values of how things should be done. These norms are spread through organizations and can be formalized in an organizational field, resulting in a strategic response of compliance with norms specified by the organizational field even though normative pressures have no direct consequences in the form of penalties or enforcement. The following quotes illustrate the presence of organizational participation in sustainable commitment, communicated through values and mission statements:

Q31: "HEI 1 is very aware of its role in society. Good scientific research and teaching are crucial for a safe, healthy, sustainable, prosperous and just world" (*Sustainability - The Sustainable University*, n.d.).

Q32: "The University bears a responsibility to society. It regards this as a responsibility not only to present generations but also to future ones" (*Profile*, n.d.).

Q33: "HEI 1 is an integral part of the community and contributes to a sustainable society. Over the coming years our University will become even greener" (*Sustainability - The Sustainable University*, n.d.).

Q34: "Sustainability is a key factor in our societal role, and it is an issue that features strongly not only in the University's teaching and research but also in its management" (*Sustainability - The Sustainable University*, n.d.).

There is evidence that suggests the presence of normative pressures in this case. It is evident that the organization tries to establish a behaviour pattern that prioritizes sustainability by incorporating sustainability as an institutional value because of the perceived prestige and legitimacy in the field.

### **Presence of Normative Pressures in HEI 2**

Content analysis was conducted with respect to normative values communicated through institutional values at the organizational level. Normative pressures in the form of institution values ensures organizational adherence in order to attain a sense of legitimacy through the act of participating in legitimate behavior standards, which in our case, is the adoption of sustainable practices (see Q35 and Q36 below). It can be understood that normative drivers in the form of perceived legitimate actions and values increase the adoption of sustainable practices by promoting influence due to organizational obligation to conform to the other organizations that function in the same organizational field. However, it should be noted that one drawback of this research is the lack of data regarding normative pressures in this study. Therefore the length of these sections have been justified by the limitations to measure the normative pressure in a research that utilizes content analysis.

Q35: “It is the HEI 2's job to create the conditions that will foster sustainable behaviour within the academic community” (Amsterdam, 2016).

Q36: “As a public institution, we need to lead by example. We have set out a number of key sustainability targets that fit with our institutional profile as a university” (Amsterdam, 2020).

### 4.3 Experienced Isomorphic Pressures

TABLE 7

Experienced Isomorphic Pressures

Organization	Coercive Institutional Factors	Mimetic Institutional Factors	Normative Institutional Factors
<b>HEI 1</b>	<p><b><i>C1: Legal frameworks</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Environmental Management Act</li> <li>• Activities Decree</li> <li>• Environmental permits for laboratory buildings</li> <li>• Third Long-Term Agreement on Energy Efficiency (MJA3)</li> <li>• Covenant on sustainable procurement</li> </ul> <p><b><i>C2: Pressure within HEI</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Targets set by the HEI itself</li> <li>• Covenant on sustainable procurement</li> </ul>	<p><b><i>M1: Networks</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Green Office</li> <li>• Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU).</li> </ul> <p><b><i>M2: Competition</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participation in sustainable ranking (SustainaBul).</li> </ul>	<p><b><i>NI: Values</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The University bears a responsibility to society.” (<i>Profile</i>, n.d.).</li> <li>• “HEI 1 is an integral part of the community and contributes to a sustainable society.” (<i>Sustainability - The Sustainable University</i>, n.d.).</li> </ul>
<b>HEI 2</b>	<p><b><i>C1: Legal frameworks</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Covenant on sustainable procurement</li> <li>• 'nearly Zero Energy" (nZEB)</li> </ul> <p><b><i>C2: Pressure within HEI</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Targets set by the HEI itself</li> <li>• Covenant on sustainable procurement</li> </ul>	<p><b><i>M1: Networks</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Green Office</li> <li>• Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU).</li> </ul> <p><b><i>M2: Competition</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participation in sustainable ranking (SustainaBul).</li> </ul>	<p><b><i>NI: Values</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “A second value that we put into practice is sustainability. As a vanguard player, HEI 2 has a vital role to play in the transition to a sustainable society.” (Amsterdam, 2020).</li> <li>• “As a public institution, we need to lead by example” (Amsterdam, 2020).</li> </ul>

Sources: Environmental Policy Plans and institution webpages

**Abbreviations**

**C1:** Pressures from the government in the form of regulation and mandates

**C2:** Pressure within the institution

**M1:** Pressures from networks/work groups

**M2:** Competition

**N1:** Values of professionalism



## **CHAPTER 5. OVERVIEW OF THE RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **5.1 Sustainability**

Table 6 shows the presence of the items for measuring the extent to which Dutch universities incorporate sustainable practices that were discussed in the Methods chapter. The results indicate that both organizations have similar and high sustainability engagement. For all items in both institutions, the strategies on sustainability were present. This indicates that high level of sustainability is positively related with high levels of isomorphic pressures.

### **5.2 Isomorphic Pressures**

As it was discussed in the Methods chapter, Table 7 shows us, in general terms, the extent of isomorphic pressures experienced by each organization. The results indicated that both institutions faced high levels of coercive, mimetic and normative pressures which affected the incentive to adopt sustainable practices. Combined with the results of sustainability levels, this suggests that there is a positive relationship between isomorphic pressures and the adoption of sustainable practices. The following section presents a general analysis regarding the isomorphic pressures.

### **5.3 Discussion of the Results**

The primary objective of this research was to empirically examine the effect of isomorphic pressures on the adoption of sustainable policies in Dutch higher education institutions. The research question that drove this study was: Do isomorphic pressures influence the adoption of sustainable practices? While answering this question, empirical testing was conducted based on the theoretical model based on the study of DiMaggio and Powell (1983).

In the following sections, the main findings and the theoretical contributions will be discussed. The results provides solid evidence for the positive effects of coercive, mimetic and normative pressures seperately. Based on the results, it can be said that there is evidence in favor of the hypothesis that isomorphic pressures have a positive influence on the adoption of sustainable practices.

The content analysis demonstrated that both institutions, HEI 1 and HEI 2 were facing pressure from the government and within the institution. Specifically, these pressures were resulting from formal and informal pressures in the form of regulations, covenants and monitoring. Coercive pressures coming from the government may directly force the institutions to adopt certain sustainable practices and it can also motivate the institutions in a more subtle, indirect way. In this context, regulations were found to be very effective and most critical driver of sustainability when compared to voluntary actions based on coercive pressures within the institution. This finding is consistent with the works of Horak et. al (2018) and Williamson et. al. (2006) who argued that regulations and government policies were among the most significant factors for incorporating sustainable practices. On this basis, the findings related to coercive pressures can point to the reasons behind the lack of sustainable commitment in higher education institutions where there is no direct coercive pressure from the government. Thus, we can argue that regulations imposed by the government which has direct consequences and harm the survival of the organization are more effective in increasing sustainability commitment.

The second observation based on the findings is the possibility of an overlap between two sources of pressures. The results indicated that the direct coercive pressure may intermingle with the indirect pressures within the institution in the form of voluntary participation in legal frameworks. Coercive pressures to institutionalize sustainable practices heighten the efforts to be perceived legitimate and successful which motivates the organizations to limit

themselves to institutional logics that encourage sustainability and cause a shift in the interests of the organization.

The empirical findings also proved the positive relationship between mimetic pressures and the adoption of sustainable practices. Furthermore, the content analysis revealed that relationship oriented socialization positively affected the implementation of sustainable practices by increasing the incentive to undertake sustainability responsibilities. This aligns with the argument of Horak et. al. (2018) who argues that the pressure from peer institutions can serve as examples to undertake sustainable initiatives.

Organizations tend to imitate the behaviors of organizations they perceive as successful or legitimate (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Galaskiewicz & Wasserman, 1989). The findings of this research identified that when it comes to the establishment and operations of a Green Office, institutions exchange information and exert pressure on each other to imitate the best environmental practices and sustainability practices, creating a learning environment between institutions that operate in the same organizational field. This analysis also aligns with the theory of Meyer and Rowan (1977), who argued that mimetic pressures occur when organizations face cognitive uncertainty which in turn leads to the adoption of practices that belongs to seemingly more legitimate or successful organizations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 1987). Another important finding was the presence of a network that aims to create a platform for exchanging information regarding the best practices for sustainability, namely, the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU). This finding corresponds to the previous literature which argues that mimetic pressures become significant especially when information is lacking, pushing the organizations to imitate the behavior of other organizations (Dacin et al., 2002; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Lastly, the results of our study indicate that there normative pressures had a positive effect on the adoption of sustainable practices. The extant literature suggest that normative isomorphism is influenced by orientation towards high levels of sustainability (Horak et al., 2018, p. 533). From the findings, it can be concluded that the values advocated by the institutions that function in the same organizational field play a primary role in the institutions' decision to incorporate sustainable policies. Based on the findings, we can argue that there is evidence for the positive relationship between isomorphic pressures and adoption of sustainable practices.

However, it should be noted that this evidence of similar sustainable practices between two organizations does not implicate a perfect example of isomorphism, but rather a similarity among the overriding structures and practices which seemed to be influenced by the institutional pressures. Simply put, the institutional framework used in this study tends to exaggerate the isomorphic perspective and presume the nature of a change as isomorphic, when it could simply be considered standardization or similarity. Therefore, it is reasonable to acknowledge this weakness in the model and scope of this study.

## CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION

The influence of isomorphic pressures on the adoption of sustainable practices in Dutch higher education institutions was analyzed through the framework of institutional theory, referring to the argument that organizations adopt certain practices as a response to their institutional environment. Institutions exist and operate in an organizational field which changes and becomes homogeneous as isomorphic pressures arise. When applied to our case, this theory suggests the presence of isomorphic pressures in the Dutch higher education field that causes the institutionalization and homogenization of sustainable practices. In order to uncover the sources and mechanisms of these pressures, this study analyzed the isomorphic pressures in two Dutch higher education organizations, which were codified as HEI 1 and HEI 2 through content analysis.

In the empirical chapter, the three types of isomorphic pressures were reviewed and analyzed, as well as the level of sustainability in both institutions. While assessing the effect of isomorphic pressures, an empirical test using qualitative data revealed the sources of coercive, mimetic and normative pressures exerted on both organizations. The institutional pressures were measured through an index consisting of legal frameworks, network, competition and institutional values. The findings suggested that isomorphic pressures have a positive effect on the adoption of sustainable practices and commitment.

Based on the findings of the study, evidence for coercive pressures were found to be the most significant one. The coercive pressures exerted by the government through various channels such as the municipalities and the Ministry of the Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment (VROM) and by the institutions themselves provided the most extensive and reliable data among the three types of pressures. The mimetic pressures were found to be as a result of competition and network groups that create an environment of

mimicry. Here, it is important to emphasize the role of information sharing between higher education organizations as a key consideration.

## **6.1 Limitations**

As mentioned in the previous chapters, this study has several limitations, partly owing to the theoretical framework which the study is built upon. Firstly, it is fair to claim that the new institutionalist stream has put an over-emphasis on the process of isomorphism, leading to an exaggeration and misjudgement of similar practices. The lack of a common index or guideline to identify homogeneity and inability to determine the nature of institutional change presents a challenge to the feasibility of the research. To put it simply, while sustainable practices can become institutionalized and lead to homogeneity among organizations, this does not necessarily mean that the change was isomorphic in nature. Further research is necessary in order to determine the factors that differentiates isomorphic change from what could be called a natural process of change through standardization. Secondly, although the indicators of the research pointed to high levels of isomorphic pressures, these indicators are not sufficient to support the evidence of isomorphism. In order to achieve a better understanding of the institutions, the analysis must include other factors such as organizational responses, organizational culture and interaction between the institutional pressures. This could add an important lens to the study by unblurring the lines between the three types of isomorphic pressures and eliminate the overlapping categories. Finally, it should be pointed out that due to the scope of this study, the findings are not sufficient to generalize findings can be generalized or transferred to other settings or groups other than Dutch higher education organizations.

## **6.2 Implications of Research**

The results of this study may be of use for administrative and decision-making bodies in the higher education field. First, higher education institutions may effectively incorporate sustainable practices if they demonstrate greater effort to participate in legal frameworks in the future. Secondly, administrative bodies in higher education institutions should make a commitment to establish and participate in networks that promote sustainability. These networks can create pathways which will positively influence the imitation behavior of institutions.

## **6.3 Directions for Further Research**

Future studies that analyze isomorphic pressures and institutional change might provide more rigorous results by measuring the strategic conformity of the organizations with a quantitative method. This would increase the potential of the study to achieve a more accurate operationalization of isomorphism. Furthermore, while this study shows evidence for similarity between organizations, a broader scope consisting of more organizations would depict isomorphism in the field level and increase the diversity of networks of relationships. Further studies could explore the conditions and extent to which isomorphism occurs in the educational field where the findings can be used outside of the national context.

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