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EVANTHIA KALPAZIDOU SCHMIDT  
AND KAMMA LANGBERG

## **Academic Autonomy in a Rapidly Changing Higher Education Framework**

**Academia on the Procrustean Bed?**

### **Governance and management of universities**

The challenges for European universities in a steadily changing environment are manifold. Governance and management of universities are in particular affected, as they have to respond rapidly to a demanding environment. As states provide less of universities' core funding and market pressures increase, the need for governance and management of institutions to ensure an effective and sustainable financial basis becomes even more apparent. New governance and management challenges are the result of both internal and external pressures. Internal pressures following a rapid growth in the volume of higher education activity—in terms of both student numbers and complexity of the student population—and research amounts are greater than ever. External pressures consist of scarce resources and a complex and highly competitive environment with demands for a quick response to a broad range of interests and stakeholders.

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Dr. Evanthia Kalpazidou Schmidt is an associate professor at the University of Aarhus, Denmark. Her main fields of interest are higher education and research policy, science and society, sociology of science, research environments and production of knowledge, knowledge management and capacity building, and comparative studies and evaluation. Dr. Kamma Langberg is a senior researcher at the University of Aarhus. Her main fields of interest are research management and labor market and empirical studies.

At the same time, universities are subject to intensive policy making, as they are perceived in a wider socioeconomic context (i.e., as instruments to achieve national objectives responding to globalization challenges). In this context, such concepts as Europeanization, internationalization, and globalization are being intensively discussed. In a number of European countries, the recognition of the university's key role in the evolution of the knowledge society—and in the identification and solving of political, socioeconomic, environmental, and cultural problems—has led to radical reforms of higher education systems. Economic growth and competitiveness, performance contracts and accountability, knowledge management, and effectiveness have become the new buzzwords. Governmental policies, driven by the ideology of global market and focusing on competitiveness, have provided incentives for higher education institutions to change the orientation of research and education from discipline-inspired to market driven (De Boer 2000).

The Bologna Declaration refers explicitly to the need to increase the international competitiveness of European higher education, making competitiveness a driving force for the internationalization of higher education (De Wit 2006; Van der Wende 1997).<sup>1</sup> In North and West European countries, a shift in paradigms—from political to economic—has been noticed, which according to Van der Wende (2001) is a shift from cooperation to competition. The debate on the globalization of education, in particular higher education, also in relation to internationalization, is prolific and important (Altbach 2006; Enders and Fulton 2002; Knight 2006; Scott 2000). Discussing the European response to the challenges of globalization compared to internationalization, Van Vught et al. observe that “internationalization is closer to the well-established tradition of international cooperation and mobility and to the core academic values of quality and excellence, whereas globalization refers more to competition, pushing the concept of higher education as a tradable commodity and challenging the concept of higher education as a public good” (2002, p. 117).

At the same time, current international debate reveals a widespread institutional tendency to shift from centralized to decentralized systems, that is, they shift from direct government control to a legal status of a more corporate nature (OECD 2007). In many European countries, a development toward a greater autonomy of institutions in terms of governance, management, and strategy has been observed, driven by the above-mentioned factors, namely reduced core funding, increasing market pressures, and the broader role of the institutions. Accountability and the establishment of mechanisms to ensure it is, hence, an effect of increased autonomy of institutions. It is obvious that while in the past institutional relationships were directed toward the central government, nowadays multiple stakeholders articulate their

interests and demands, which results in a complex internal decision-making and management process (De Boer 2000; OECD 2007). This makes more effective institutional management a necessity.

A number of other trends have also been noticed with regards to financing, such as a shift from incremental to formula-based funding, from detailed grants to block grants and from direct (state) to indirect (agencies) financing. Other important issues are the increasing use of competitive funding, contract management, the introduction of budgeting systems, and regular reporting and evaluation (OECD 2007). From one perspective, it looks like the European systems are converging, but studies reveal that they still differ with respect to the institutional autonomy in terms of financing, organization, and management (OECD 2004, 2007).

In some European countries, the systems of higher education have changed not only because of the above-mentioned factors and policy interventions but also because of rapid economic development (Langberg 2004). Even within countries, differentiations have been observed; in Germany, university systems vary in the different federal states [*Länder*] (OECD 2007), while in the U.K. large differences are found among higher education institutions. In a small country such as Denmark, differences in the organization and management of higher education institutions based mainly on historical reasons have also been observed (Langberg 2003).<sup>2</sup>

Even among countries traditionally viewed as sharing socioeconomic conditions and cultural values, such as Scandinavia, where higher education is perceived as a public good, important differences are found in the development of higher education systems (Kalpazidou Schmidt 2006a; Tjeldvoll 2005). In Norway, “quality reform” has been implemented, with the goal of improving quality, increasing institutional autonomy, and developing a more result-oriented higher education funding system; the effects are not yet visible. In Sweden, the focus is on increased decentralization and institutional autonomy, continued quality improvement, interdisciplinarity, and cooperation with societal actors. In Finland, where the higher education system is competitive, focused on outcome and innovation, a “management by results” principle was adopted early on to increase accountability.

Denmark has implemented the most radical reforms of the region in terms of governance and management of institutions as well as strategic selection of activities (see Kalpazidou Schmidt 2004; Kalpazidou Schmidt et al. 2007). In 2003, the Danish parliament approved a university act that changed the legislative framework and economic conditions for universities. Board members are now appointed with a majority representing external interests, with the result that universities have gained a greater degree of self-governance and institutional autonomy. Another important change is the appointment

(rather than election, as previously) of institutional leaders (rectors, deans of faculties, and heads of departments) and the abolition of collegial bodies. Moreover, the new act extends the role of universities, incorporating exchange of knowledge and competencies with society, including the private sector. Strategic selection of research and education activities is another priority. A merging of universities and government research institutes has also been implemented. The aim of the mergers was to strengthen education and research, sharpen the profile, and improve the competitive edge of Danish universities (Kalpazidou Schmidt 2004, 2006b; Ministry of Science, Technology, and Innovation 2006). Mergers have led to a concentration of power and control at the top level of institutions.

In addition, there are strong indications that further major changes targeting the funding system of higher education institutions will be implemented in the near future. The Danish government has recently presented an ambitious globalization strategy (Danish Prime Minister's Office 2006). A number of recommendations in the strategy focus on the university system:

—From 2008, basic funding of universities will be based on evaluations of the institutions' ability to reach objectives given in a development contract. The quality of university research will be evaluated by international independent expert panels and a "quality barometer" for research based on internationally acknowledged indicators will be established.

—Universities will be requested to develop concrete goals as regards the use of research and development [R&D] in society.

—More funding will be allotted to strategic research of importance for the development of society.

—50 percent of public R&D funding will be competitive by 2010 (as opposed to the current 33 percent).

—Public R&D investments will reach 1 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) by 2010 so as to achieve the 3 percent objective of the Lisbon strategy (2 percent is already provided by industry).<sup>3</sup>

In conclusion, with the new reforms, Denmark is at the forefront of Europe in its use of university research policy to achieve the objectives of the Lisbon strategy.

### **Management of knowledge at Danish universities**

Developing knowledge and building competences to be used in different sectors in the transition to knowledge-intensive economy is the core of the recent university reform. The Danish government, aiming to foster the transition to a knowledge-based society, has compelled universities to take on a new role as providers of knowledge and know-how for growth, and promoters of

welfare in cooperation with other public and private institutions. A new national strategy is therefore set in the context of the governments' education and research policy, and transfer of knowledge to enterprise sector. As the proportion of universities' income from public funds is high, the government expects to improve the effectiveness of universities and achieve higher levels of accountability (Kalpazidou Schmidt 2006b).

With the reform of 2003, a significant innovation has been introduced in public law with self-governing universities. The establishment of institutional self-governance with boards and appointed rectors was made in an effort to increase the independence of the universities in relation to the Ministry for Science, Technology, and Innovation. The long-term intention is to continue to add competences and transfer responsibilities to the universities and increase autonomy in relation to the ministry. Universities, however, continue to be under the supervision and control of the minister, who may intervene in the decisions of the boards if the boards do not live up to their responsibilities. A number of proposals require even the approval of the Ministry of Finance.

Self-governance also implies independence from the ministry to administer funds, approve programs, and appoint professors. Autonomy in this aspect has not yet been achieved. The ministry continues to have (more limited) control over approval of academic programs, the number and appointment of professors, and the number of administrative staff. The ministry has also retained control over central planning of the supply of graduates in the regions.

These limitations weaken institutional autonomy and impede efforts to make strategic decisions to promote effectiveness and productivity, as the university act requires. Independence could provide institutions with the necessary autonomy to operate more effectively and address upcoming challenges. However, the Ministry of Science, Technology, and Innovation has no intentions of giving up existing control until universities have demonstrated their competences regarding management. But this approach is working against stated objectives and might delay the achievement of the required competence (Kalpazidou Schmidt 2006b).

University development contracts, introduced in 1999, continue to be used as planning tools for the institutions and monitoring instruments for the ministry.<sup>4</sup> Development contracts have so far been used only as monitoring instruments in the development of universities. However, it is anticipated that they will be used as a ministry control mechanism and will have a direct impact on the autonomy of institutions and freedom of researchers.

While institutions have gained autonomy, the autonomy of professors has been restricted with the introduction of boards, the abolition of collegial

bodies, and the appointment of rectors, deans, and department leaders (although leaders have to be acknowledged researchers). Moreover, the freedom of professors has been constrained due to the implementation of strategic planning and prioritization in both research and education, and increased demands for more user-oriented, relevant, and “socially robust” research.

Setbacks for staff could result from the restriction of autonomy in combination with the staff age structure, a latent problem, as many professors will retire over the next decade (in particular in the humanities and the natural and health sciences). Consequently, a main challenge for the universities is to invest in new appointment plans to smoothen transition to the new generation (Kalpazidou Schmidt 2006a). However, in an international environment with increasing competition among institutions of higher education, among others, for recruitment of the best academic staff, Danish universities may face difficulties recruiting staff in a setting where power has been moved from professors. Temporary contracts for researchers at all levels have become more common. Before the beginning of this century, all younger researchers (research assistants, post docs, and assistant professors) signed temporary contracts, but very few associate and full professors did). Since then, temporary contracts have been widely introduced at all levels, and many of them are directly connected to specific research projects that often are financed by external resources, which means that some researchers are dependent on external funds in order to continue their careers. This makes recruitment of researchers even more difficult because of the decreased attractiveness of an academic career.

Another important factor is the working conditions of professors. A hierarchical model has replaced the collegiate model (which implies partnership in terms of equality of status and participation) and has introduced differentiations on professors’ status, power, and reward. Performance-based salaries and the intention of the ministry to establish “super-professoriates” with special funds are some of the differentiation mechanisms being increasingly used (Enders 2006).

Implementation of the 2003 reform has had an effect for only a few years. By setting a completely new agenda for higher education, the government has gradually started to change the conditions, norms and values, and self-perception of the traditionally strong Humboldtian culture at Danish universities (Kalpazidou Schmidt 2006b).

A discussion of individual academic freedom and autonomy must obviously take into consideration the radically changed environment, which puts demands on greater institutional autonomy, building on stronger management of processes and control of outputs. This means that institutional au-

tonomy and academic freedom, often perceived as more or less identical, have become differentiated (Enders 2006). In the Danish context, the issue of individual academic autonomy and freedom in teaching and research has been neglected, with the focus now on institutional autonomy. In addition, whenever autonomy is being discussed, the concepts autonomy of institutions, autonomy of research teams, and individual academic freedom are being mixed up. The following sections address the issue of professional academic freedom and autonomy.

### **Academic freedom and autonomy**

Academic freedom and autonomy is a fundamental value of universities, as it affects all aspects of academic activity. These days, professional academic freedom is under fire due to factors described in earlier sections. However, the concept—compared to finance and management issues and in relation to institutional autonomy—is not high on the international agenda and is rarely discussed in the context of the current changes sweeping higher education (Altbach 2001). According to Altbach, “More attention needs to be given to the mission and values of the university, for without academic freedom, universities cannot achieve their potential nor fully contribute to the emerging knowledge-based society” (ibid., p. 206). Even though academic freedom is at the core of the mission of universities, it is obvious that it is difficult to define the concept. From the medieval times, it has meant the freedom of professors to teach without external control, and it has implied the freedom of students to learn. In the early nineteenth century, when research became a part of the academic mission, the Humboldtian idea of academic freedom—freedom to teach and learn—became widespread. Academic freedom gave professors special protection and academia claimed special rights because of their devotion to pursue knowledge and truth. However, academic freedom was for several reasons never unconditional (Altbach 2001).

There are, as pointed out earlier, different dimensions of autonomy discussed in relation to higher education. One dimension is institutional autonomy, that is, the degree of independence of the institution from the stakeholders. In the European framework, the state is usually the main stakeholder (even though other interests and actors are forcefully entering the higher education scene). Consequently, in this case, the focus is on the relationship between the institution and the state, which vary widely among the countries in terms of legal status and strategic decision making, funding, employment of staff, and ownership of assets (OECD 2004).

Another dimension is autonomy perceived as individual professional freedom for academia to select research objects as well as research and publica-

tion method. However, professional academic freedom has many limitations. In the European context, these limitations are often imposed by scarce financial resources. Over the two last decades, according to the literature, the sense of crisis of the academic profession has though grown (Altbach 2000; Enders 2001, 2006; Farnham 1999; Kogan et al. 1994). Academics have traditionally valued their autonomy and academic freedom very highly, perceiving it as one of the primary values of the profession (Enders 2006; Langberg 2003). Defining academic freedom, Enders (2006) differentiates between the European and American tradition. The first is mainly defined as freedom of teaching and research (freedom of academics to choose their topics, concepts, methods, and sources) and the right to contribute to academic communities in accordance with the standards and rules of academia. In contrast, the American tradition incorporates the civil and political freedoms of academics and their right to speak and write outside their area of academic expertise (Shils 1991).

Academia, although not a homogeneous body, has been characterized by a high degree of job satisfaction, high status, and social position. Enders (2006) draws attention to the point that even though professors are not as well remunerated as other comparable employees outside universities, the intrinsic reward—for example, a high degree of freedom in the use of time, the possibility to do challenging and interesting work, a low degree of control, and a reputation among other scholars—might be even more important than salary and employment. However, the picture is changing due to external pressures, demands for increased competition, and the growing differentiation of status groups within academia.

Even though academic freedom has always been challenged for various reasons, increasing interests in strengthening accountability and competitiveness of higher education have in recent years weakened the authority of academia and undermined the traditional elite. In this context, trust in the self-steering capacities of professors who are best let alone to manage research and education is diminishing (De Boer 2002; Enders 2006; Trow 1996). The rationale is that trust in the epoch of competitiveness and accountability has to be earned again and again. The relationship between accountability and power is discussed by Enders, among others, who points out “a certain correlation between accountability and power: those who define the processes and criteria for accountability measurements will have predefined performance and success to a certain extent. The struggle around the setting for evaluations and quality assessments, as well their external and internal use, has thus developed into one of the main arenas of ongoing power games within and around higher education” (2006, p. 12) (see Morley 2003).



### **Academic autonomy at Danish universities**

Academic freedom and individual autonomy has long been the cornerstone of Danish universities. Senior faculty have played an important role in decision making. Until the beginning of this century, governing collegial bodies had gained increased power. The traditional model of governance with collegial decision-making structures have been increasingly criticized by policymakers, industry, parts of academia, and other stakeholders. This model was considered to demonstrate ineffectiveness and incompatibility within changing environments. However, the model was functioning differently in different higher education institutions and its success was dependent on the organization of the research environment, the in-house academic culture, and the personality and style of leaders (Graversen et al. 2005; Kalpazidou Schmidt 1996; Kalpazidou Schmidt et al. 2003).

With the implementation of the university act of 2003, a new distribution of power and responsibility has been established that shifted formal control from academic staff to appointed leaders and external interests. A “top down” management model replaced the “bottom up” model. The new boards serve as representatives not only of the university, but also of the general public and the industrial sector, and have important governance and management functions in setting strategic targets for universities (see Shattock 2003). The act provides university boards, rectors, and deans with the authority, framework, and instruments to make strategic decisions by concentrating all power at the top. In this respect, the Danish model of governance is unique in Europe.

The replacement of the collegial model with professional managers has an important impact on institutions and their staff. As the number of full-time administrators is increasing, academia is being decentralized in terms of the influence of power. The new model of governance and management based on the activities of a growing full-time body of professional managers shows movement away from the significance of professors in the decision-making process (see Sporn 2006). As a consequence, managers acquire the means to monitor and control academic staff and their activities.

The balance between the needs of the academia and the goals and strategic agenda of the appointed leadership is an issue at Danish universities. However, because many of the currently appointed deans and department heads come from academic staff and before their appointments had the same positions as elected deans and department heads, the transition has been smooth. The question is whether the involvement of academic staff in managerial positions will continue and to what degree. Another key question is how the new leadership that has concentrated all power in their hands is going to use this extended power potential. Sporn writes about the distribu-

tion of power: “As institutions move toward more market-oriented entrepreneurial models, governance will be concentrated more in the hands of the top leadership. Administration will move toward professional management. The balance between authority of the faculty and the power of administration is at stake” (2006, p. 154).

The authority of faculty staff is diminishing and professional management is for the first time a reality at Danish universities due to severe policy intervention. The main question in Danish higher education is accordingly whether current reforms have established the right balance among professional academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and accountability to society, the state, and other stakeholders.

Comparative longitudinal studies (Langberg and Boel 2006; Langberg and Lauridsen 2001) reveal that the implementation of the new university act did not have a significant impact on individual researchers’ influence on the content of the research projects, working conditions, and time allocation. The studies also reveal that a large group of Danish professors do not expect significant changes, although the framework for their activities has been radically changed. This outcome has several explanations: (1) former changes did not have an important impact and professors expect that this will be the case with current reforms; (2) professors assume that they do not need to take into consideration the new appointed management and will continue “business as usual”; and (3) many professors acknowledge that the management of universities nowadays is a task for full-time professionals, not part-time amateurs. Their argument is that responsible leadership is a precondition for autonomy, efficient administration, and effective resource allocation (see Jacobsen et al. 2001; Kalpazidou Schmidt 1996; Langberg and Lauridsen 2001; Lauridsen 2002).

## **Conclusion**

Although the state retains control of higher education in Denmark by a wide range of accountability mechanisms (such as performance contracts and the introduction of a system for assessments of research production), it is evident that universities have gained more institutional autonomy. The apparent shift from individual to institutional autonomy provides more flexibility for universities to set strategic objectives. At the same time, universities become more open to societal demands (imposed by the recent university act). The government, although it is the driving force of changes implementing the Lisbon strategy, is hence not the only actor in the new developments. Other stakeholders such as the industry are vigorously promoting their interests.

The increasing institutional autonomy with high demands on account-

ability and competitiveness, together with the push toward openness of Danish universities to society, have made governance and management of universities a complex issue. The policy- and decision-making process at universities has become much more complicated. According to Vossensteyn “they become more and more part of a multi-layered system where agenda setting and decision-making take place on various levels (and across various sectors) simultaneously” (2006, p. 34).

However, the implementation process is an open question, as it is not obvious that the policy and decisions, adopted by the government on the one hand and the leadership and management of institutions on the other, will be accepted and implemented by the academic staff. Vossensteyn (*ibid.*, p. 34) writes: “And increasingly it is becoming clear that whilst the opening up of the university may be a strategic objective embraced by institutional leaders, this does not equate with easy and straightforward implementation. In this respect, academia still is a powerful force to be reckoned with.” In particular, in the Danish university system where professors have lost their influence on decision making to appointed leaders, implementation processes might become even more complex. Danish professors, who are used to extensive autonomy in choosing their research subjects and methods, and to free publishing of their results, will be increasingly constrained by strategic institutional decisions, monitoring, and control.

The question is whether the new management, with stronger control on production, demands on competition, and focus on relevance of research, might have an impact on professors’ control over tasks and working conditions. Ziman (1991) points out the risks with a bureaucratic model where academic research controls the decisions on how to conduct research, but has lost control over the research agenda to external interests. The changing role of governance in higher education and the loss of trust in professors’ self-steering ability, as opposed to strategic decision making, accountability, and assessments, is changing the balance in relation to management and external stakeholders (Kalpazidou Schmidt 2006b). The balance between the authority of the faculty and the power of leadership and administration is at stake.

However, due to a strong academic culture (but also the high degree of dependency of other sectors and society in general on the creativeness and novelty associated with free research) it may be possible to sustain a balance between professional freedom and autonomy on the one side and accountability and competition on the other (see Tjeldvoll 2005). Throughout several other reforms of the universities in the past, Danish professors have been able to maintain this balance and assume that they can continue on the same path. The question is whether this is possible in a rapidly changing framework. Academic life at Danish universities continues largely as before. Yet

pressures on the academic staff are unprecedented and significant change will inevitably occur. The key issue is to define the role of the university in the emerging knowledge-based society and to establish the balance among individual academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and accountability to external stakeholders.

## Notes

1. The Bologna process was initiated in 1999, when twenty-nine European ministers in charge of higher education met in Bologna to lay the basis for establishing a European higher education area by 2010 and promoting the European system of higher education worldwide. In 2005, the total number of signatory countries in the Bologna process was forty-five. In the Bologna Declaration, the ministers affirmed their intention to: (a) adopt comparable degrees; (b) implement a system with two main cycles (undergraduate/graduate); (c) establish a common system of credits, encourage mobility, and promote European cooperation in quality assurance; and (d) promote European dimensions in higher education.

2. However, the results of a study of fifteen Danish research environments reveal that regardless of the university acts and formal management structure, dynamic and innovative research environments seem to converge with regard to research management and organization (Graversen et al. 2005; Kalpazidou Schmidt et al. 2003).

3. At the Lisbon and Barcelona European Councils in the beginning of the new century, the European Union committed the member states to achieve the objective to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based society and economy in the world by 2010, and to increase investment in research on average to 3 percent of member states' GDP (two-thirds from the private sector). In March 2005, the European Council, based on an evaluation of the progress made toward achieving the objectives, relaunched the Lisbon Strategy and refocused priorities on growth and employment, placing the main emphasis on knowledge, innovation, and optimization of human capital.

4. In 1999, development contracts between universities and the Danish Ministry of Science, Technology, and Innovation were introduced. A university development contract is a letter of intent stating strategic areas on which the university intends to focus. The *first-generation university development contracts* (2000–4) focused on education and research, quality assurance, internationalization, IT-based learning, and innovation. The *second-generation contracts* focus on the strengthening of links with society, national and international cooperation, quality assurance, research, and benchmarking with foreign universities (Ministry of Science, Technology, and Innovation 2004).

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