European Flagship universities: Autonomy and change

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Many university systems in Europe are going through a remarkable reform and transformation period spanning several decades. After a series of national reforms in the 1980s and 1990s, from the late 1990s on several European-level reforms were initiated, including the inter-governmental Bologna process and supranational modernization agendas for higher education (Commission 2006, 2011). While the European initiatives continue to have an impact, new national reforms have been introduced which, like the European reforms, are inspired by a 'global reform script' (Gornitzka and Maassen 2014). In all of these reform initiatives the university is widely recognized as a core knowledge institution, and regarded as one of the few institutions that can help Europe to come out of its current multidimensional crisis. As pointed out by the European Commission (2005: 152); "Europe must strengthen the three poles of its knowledge triangle: education, research and innovation. Universities are essential in all three". Strengthening the three poles of the knowledge triangle and their interrelationships is supposed to make Europe more successful in converting learning outcomes and research achievements into commercial technologies and high-level jobs, as well as contribute to enhanced economic growth and reduced social inequality (Maassen and Stensaker 2011)

In the European and national reform agendas considerable emphasis is put on the need to increase the autonomy of the universities, professionalise institutional leadership and management, and make institutional governance structures more effective. It is expected that a more autonomous, professional institutional leadership will be able to make the university more responsive to societal needs and guide it into effective partnerships with private sector actors. "Effective partnerships" refers to linking the scientific research and educational activities of the university more directly to business, with the aim of improving Europe's performance in innovation. While early national reform agendas were focused in a rather segmented way on education and its quality on the one hand and basic research and its quality on the other (Goedegebuure et al. 1994), the European reform agendas include innovation and call for strengthened links between education, research and innovation (Maassen and Stensaker 2011).

The governmental reform ideologies encompass knowledge economy interpretations that emphasize the importance of human over other resources for economic competitiveness and societal welfare (Powell and Snellman 2004). Consequently, for being successful, knowledge economies are dependent on strong universities and colleges. At the same time, the European as well as national level reform agendas reflect a general consensus that universities are not delivering up to their potential, and the reforms are therefore aimed at creating more direct and more effective couplings of the university to society's needs. This double-edged sword situation, in the sense of being an essential institution in any vision on Europe's socio-

economic future, but also being diagnosed as not functioning optimally, causes opportunities as well as confusion, stress and uncertainty at various levels in the European university systems.

A closer look at the current national reform agendas reveals that there are major differences among them but also clear similarities. In essence the agendas argue that universities should become 'integrated strategic actors', led by professional leaders and managers, who are expected to develop institutional profiles, guide their institution into a fitting 'niche', and make sure that their institution's engagement with society intensifies. In this all universities are expected to be academically excellent as well as socio-economically relevant, in order to contribute to the innovative capacity of private sector companies and public sector organizations, the creation of jobs, and the solving of the grand challenges that are confronting our societies.

Strikingly, in reality the university is more difficult to reform than the reform agendas seem to assume. Further, there are significant cross-country differences in the performance of university systems and individual universities, at least when measured through indicators such as 'the quality and quantity of research outputs', 'success in attracting top students and highly productive academic staff', 'success in competition for high prestige research funding', 'student satisfaction and employability', 'internationalization', 'position of national universities and university systems in global rankings', and 'contributions to innovation'. The question can be raised what the factors are that determine the performance differences among systems and institutions. In addition, what is the impact of governmental reforms on the performance of universities? Does enhanced institutional autonomy affect institutional performance, and if so, how?

In general there is little research-based empirical evidence about how national reform agendas and the university's organization and governance structures actually contribute to performance (Olsen and Maassen 2007: 14). This situation is further aggravated by unclear concepts and problematic methods in the field of higher education studies. As indicated by Teichler (2000: 4) "Paradoxically, many politicians and administrators in this field as well as the academic profession itself, while trying to persuade society that systematic scholarship is superior to practitioners' experience, are most skeptical about the value of scholarship and research if it comes to their practical turf, i.e. higher education."

In the articles included in this special issue the analytical frameworks used in and findings of an international research project entitled "*European Flagship Universities: balancing academic excellence and socio-economic relevance*" are presented and discussed. The FLAGSHIP project aimed at producing better insights into the relationship between reform agendas with their underlying ideologies, and university practices, with an emphasis on the departmental level. The project was focused on the way in which selected flagship universities in Europe interpret and use their institutional autonomy in two areas, research management and personnel policies.

The FLAGSHIP project: balancing academic excellence and socio-economic relevance

The FLAGSHIP project brought together some 10 researchers based in four countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway and the Netherlands). The research centers and groups involved in one or more stages of the project were: CHEPS, University of Twente, the Netherlands; CFA, Aarhus University, Denmark; University of Helsinki, and University of Lapland, Finland; and the University of Oslo (UiO), Norway. The project was led by Åse Gornitzka (ARENA/Centre for European Studies, and Department of Political Science, UiO), while Tatiana Fumasoli (ARENA/Centre for European Studies, and Department of Education, UiO) and Peter Maassen (Department of Education, UiO) coordinated the project's empirical activities. The project was funded by the Norwegian Research Council, through its FORFI programme, aimed at strengthening the knowledge basis for research and innovation policies. It lasted from April 2013 to December 2016.

The main aim of the project was to examine how European flagship universities have adapted since 2000 to far-reaching changes in their political and socio-economic environments, and the extent to which these adaptations are initiated by the institutional leadership or are a consequence of external change drivers. A 'Flagship' university was interpreted in the project as a comprehensive, research intensive university, located in one of its country's largest urban areas. A flagship university is among the oldest and largest institutions for higher education of its country. The overall research questions of the project were formulated as follows:

- 1. What are the organised settings and institutional characteristics that attract highly qualified staff and students, encourage academic excellence and free enquiry and also make universities take seriously their social and economic responsibilities?*
- 2. What are the main autonomy-related factors that over the last 10 years have affected these organised university settings and institutional characteristics?*

The project has addressed these questions by providing systematic, comparative data and theoretically informed analyses of university adaptation patterns within their specific national governance and policy contexts. In these contexts the concept of "autonomy" has been regarded as a key dimension in the efforts of universities' to satisfy internal and external expectations. The call for "more university autonomy" has been a mantra among policy makers and stakeholders all over Europe, and is in many respects embedded general public sector governance reforms (Christensen, Gornitzka and Maassen 2014).

Theoretical perspectives

Studying adaptations of European flagship universities requires an understanding of the way in which the main 'knowledge economy' aspirations voiced in the European and national contexts, address essential questions concerning the universities' core activities, and have been translated into university reform agendas (Maassen and Stensaker 2011). The reform attempts travel through several layers of governance, and operate through different means of control. For understanding the way in which flagship universities adapt their strategies,

structures, policies and practices, one has to understand how specific university actions relate to national legal, financial-economic, and political traditions and realities.

Core assumptions underlying university reforms in Europe are first that autonomous universities will more effectively accommodate the needs of various stakeholders in the 'knowledge marketplace'; and second that strategic organisational actorhood of more autonomous universities will lead to "healthy" systemic integration and diversity. Research on how these reforms have impacted university autonomy has been focused on changes in the formal governance relationship state authorities – universities (e.g. Enders et al. 2013). In this it has been argued that even though university autonomy is formally increased when it comes to financial, management and decision-making matters, as a result of accompanying accountability and reporting demands, new incentive and competitive funding schemes, and other measures, the 'real' autonomy of universities has been reduced as a result of the reforms (Christensen 2011: 504).

However, studies on changes in the formal governance relationship cannot explain important aspects of the nature of intra-university change. From that perspective an important starting point of the Flagship project was that for understanding intra-university dynamics we have to examine what we have called the 'living university autonomy', interpreted as the ways in which the changes in the formal governance relationship between state authorities and universities are perceived, interpreted, translated, operationalised and used inside each university.

The project used an institutional theory approach in the study of university change that conceptualizes university adaptations not simply in terms of environmental determinism or strategic choice, but considers these to be part of a complex ecology of adaptation processes with several sets of determinants (Gornitzka et al. 2007: 190-194). An institutional approach gives a lot of weight to the robustness of universities and their defense mechanisms against changing environments and governmental reform initiatives (Olsen 2007: 28). An important element in this approach is the theoretical idea that university change takes place in a specific historical, political and cultural setting. This is a setting where the relationships between the university and society are regularly redefined, and where the importance of governmental reform agendas is linked to larger socio-economic and political transformations and the conditions set by them. (Gornitzka et al. 2007: 191).

There are many actors and forces across levels of governance, policy sectors and institutional spheres and no single actor or coherent group of actors is likely to perfectly control reform and change processes and their outcomes. Hence, there is no straight causal line from European and national reform agendas, or from the intentions of identifiable actors, to university performance and development. Instead, it can be argued that examining university change dynamics requires an interpretation of institutional change that includes an understanding of universities as robust and relatively resilient to changing environments and external reform initiatives (Gornitzka et al. 2007; Gornitzka and Maassen 2011). Adaptational processes and the level of institutional autonomy for universities are defined by how actors within universities see and interpret external expectations and opportunities, and how those

are matched or mismatched inside universities and carried into universities. Likewise the strategic university adaptations are not made on a clean slate. Improving our understanding of university dynamics requires that we take into account the density and types of institutionalised rules and practices in which universities are embedded, as well as their histories. These are not only restrictive and impediments to adaptive processes, but might also enable them.

Contributions to the special issue

The Flagship project was organized and executed in two phases. The first phase consisted of a general examination of European and national university policy developments in eight countries. In addition, overviews were made of major organizational and governance adaptations selected flagship universities had undergone since the early 2000s. In the selection of national and institutional cases it was taken as a starting point that in the policy debates and studies on the role of universities in European research and innovation policies most attention is focused on the large EU member states, that is, Germany, the UK, France and Italy. However, in many respects the university systems in the smaller countries in Northern and Western Europe perform remarkably well in many of the productivity areas mentioned above¹. Available data suggest that these university systems are among the most successful in the world. However, relatively little is known about the way in which small(er) European countries have reformed their university sectors, and have enlarged the autonomy of their universities, and hardly any comparative data are available on the way in which the universities in these countries have used in practice their increased formal autonomy. Therefore the Flagship project focused on flagship universities in eight small(er) European countries in three regions, that is, the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden), the Low countries (Belgium and the Netherlands), and the Alpine Germanic countries (Austria and Switzerland). The following universities from these eight countries were included in the first part of the project: the Universities of Oslo and Bergen (Norway), the Universities of Stockholm and Gothenburg (Sweden), the Universities of Copenhagen and Aarhus (Denmark), the University of Helsinki (Finland), the Universities of Amsterdam and Utrecht (the Netherlands), the Catholic University of Leuven (Belgium), the University of Zurich (Switzerland), and the University of Vienna (Austria).

In the second part the interpretations and use of university autonomy were analyzed in-depth through detailed university case studies in five of the eight countries, Austria, Belgium, Finland, the Netherlands, and Norway. The project focused in this part on the departmental level in the included universities in four academic areas, that is, chemistry, public health, psychology, and teacher education. In the departmental case studies both the interpretations of ‘autonomy’ as well as the autonomy practices were addressed. This included an examination

¹ Especially when it comes to the quality of their research output, their success in the competition for high prestige research funding (including the European Research Council), and the position of national universities in global rankings, the university systems from the countries involved in the first phase of the Flagship project perform remarkably well. This performance will be discussed in more detail in the article by Gornitzka and Maassen in this special issue.

of the actual ‘room to manoeuvre’ of the departmental leadership, that is, both the impetus for taking strategic decisions concerning the department’s profile, operations, personnel policies, primary activities, structure, etc., as well as the (bureaucratic and other) factors that limit departmental leaders’ ‘room to manoeuvre’.

As indicated, the project focused in this examination of the ‘living autonomy’ on research management and personnel policies. A case study protocol was developed, that included detailed questions on the departmental strategies and their embeddedness in the larger institutional settings; the departmental research management practices, including how the department’s research activities are organized and funded; and the department’s personnel policies, with a focus on recruitment procedures and practices. Additional questions concentrated on academic programme development procedures and practices, as well as student recruitment.

In each case university departmental level interviews were undertaken with key staff (administrative and academic) with the intention to analyze how they interpret institutional autonomy, as well as how they have used in their departmental setting(s) this autonomy. The selected interviewees included current and previous heads of department and their deputies (in total 23 interviews), the departmental head of administration (in total 9 interviews), and selected senior professors (in total 17 interviews). In each of the selected academic areas three or four departmental case studies were undertaken. In addition, all the involved departments provided the Flagship research team with relevant documents, including memos and minutes, as well as core departmental data. The team also collected data on the departmental research performance, including national research council and Horizon2020 performance data, as well as research productivity data of the departments’ tenured staff.

The contributions in this special issue address the overall research questions of the Flagship project in a number of ways. The first article, by Åse Gornitzka and Peter Maassen discusses two aspects of the current developments with respect to the autonomization of universities in Europe. First, it will examine different rationales underlying reforms for enhancing university autonomy; second it presents a conceptualization of ‘the living autonomy’. The article’s main rationale lies in the fact that studies on the formal governance relationship state authorities – universities have not been followed by a comparable scholarly focus on what in this special issue is referred to as ‘the living autonomy’. This implies an understanding of the practices of institutional autonomy at the ‘working floor’, the department (or equivalent) level. Another element of relevance for getting a better understanding of the living autonomy in universities concerns the different rationales of reforms aimed at changing university autonomy. In most reforms the assumption that autonomy prompts strategic profiling of universities, thus improves performance – interpreted from an academic as well as a socio-economic point of view – has been emphasized. This assumption is still to be verified empirically.

Åse Gornitzka and Peter Maassen focus in the second article on intra-university governance structures. The professionalization of institutional leadership and management represents a move from collective representative bodies as the main decision making actors to individual leadership and executive board responsibilities. All universities in the Flagship countries have

a central executive board with some level of external membership (ranging from around 40% to 100%). Only in Norway and Belgium are university leaders still elected, in the other countries university leaders are selected. In this article a comparative analysis will be presented of the change dynamics of university governance structures on the basis of four sets of indicators, that is, 1. the level of formal internal democratic participation; 2. the level of external participation in university governance structures; 3. the level of centralization of decision making authority in the university; and 4. the level of concentration (individual versus collective) of authority in the university. The analysis shows that despite a growing homogenization of the national university reform agendas there are still significant cross-country differences in core aspects of the intra-university governance structures.

In the third article Timo Aarrevaara, Janne Wikström, and Peter Maassen provide an analysis of the interaction among external stakeholders and internal practices in teacher education departments at flagship universities. Flagship universities operate in an environment of conflicting goals and priorities. The success of flagship universities in various competitive arenas can be identified with clear indicators. However, success in operations outside the core tasks of the academic community is more difficult to measure. The tasks outside the core of academic work are subject to abstract requirements. The Flagship project also studied the role of stakeholders in decision making bodies at universities, for example, members of university boards or stakeholder bodies targeting curriculum design and research themes. In addition to this, flagship universities are directed by regulations, research grant conditions and university-level decisions to reflect the objectives of social impact. These are major activities in the natural sciences, but they are less traditional in the social sciences and humanities. However, this article shows that departments of teacher education have been able to develop forms of action that satisfy the needs of external stakeholders. The article uses a contingency theory perspective, assuming that external conditions will determine the internal structure and practices of organisations. Our assumption is that responses to changes in the operating environment can arise from the internal capability to improve performance. At the same time there is a risk for actors in accepting a compliance culture when institutions adopt policies to describe their activities through external terms and the assumed criteria.

Tatiana Fumasoli and Bjørn Stensaker discuss in their article multi-level strategies in universities, and address the question whether these strategies are a form of coordination, contestation or increased creativity? The article argues that in the contemporary university, strategies are not only found at the institutional level, but also at various sub-levels in the organization. In principle, such multi-level strategies are assumed to be a means for institutional coordination in the sense that more generic strategic objectives may give room for local adaptation within the broader strategic framing. Whether this actually is the case is another issue, and the article analyzes the links and relations between institutional and sub-level strategies in the selected flagship universities. The findings suggest that – although introduced as integrating instruments – multi-level strategies may actually increase the complexity within the university as different strategies provide different actors with leeway for opportunistic behavior.

In the last article included in this special issue Åse Gornitzka, Peter Maassen, and Bjørn Stensaker discuss the main theoretical and empirical outcomes of the Flagship project. In this article the authors examine the notion of intra-university diversity, and the challenges attached to it. These include the university governance structure, and the organisation of education and research. How do Flagship universities balance academic responsibilities for primary processes (education and research) with the drive for management control and managerial steering? This relates to the issue of how these universities link academic development practices to bottom-line management principles (economic rationality, standardization, specialization, administrative control). Further institutional personnel policies - a core management responsibility in universities that has traditionally been taken-for-granted - are analyzed. Major issues with respect to personnel policies include: How are institutional interests versus individual staff career perspectives balanced? How are values underlying loyalty to institution versus loyalty to discipline integrated? In the article the authors discuss how the selected Flagship universities have dealt with these issues, and how differences in change dynamics between these universities can be interpreted.

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