

Challenges for studying changes in governance, organization and autonomy of research intensive universities in Europe”

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Introductory paper¹

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Background and research focus

The panel session is built around three on-going projects currently coordinated by either the HEIK (Higher Education: Institutional Dynamics and Knowledge Cultures) research group or ARENA (Centre for European Studies) at the University of Oslo:

- FLAGSHIP, studying interpretation and use of institutional autonomy in research intensive universities in more than 10 European countries;
- HOGLED, focusing, amongst other, on horizontalization of higher education governance; and
- the so-called NORGLOBAL project, addressing change dynamics of higher education and research systems in the Western Balkans.

All three projects are funded by the Norwegian Research Council. The panel will not focus on results of the three projects mentioned above (given that all three projects are in the early stages) but will rather use the experience from the work done so far in terms of developing research designs, literature reviews and analytical frameworks to discuss theoretical and methodological challenges in studying changes in governance, organization and autonomy of research intensive universities in Europe.

Research intensive universities, sometimes referred to as flagship universities, are here understood to be comprehensive universities with a strong focus on research, located in one of the country’s largest urban areas and typically being among the oldest and largest institutions for higher learning in the system. These universities often have a considerable weight in the national

¹ This paper serves to introduce the audience to the projects presented, explain the main idea behind the panel session and motivate the audience to take part in a discussion, i.e. it is not a regular conference paper and therefore should not be cited etc.

policy arena, are particularly bottom heavy (Clark, 1983; Georg Krücken, Kosmützky, & Torke, 2007) and loosely coupled (Weick, 1976) and therefore can be particularly resistant to external pressures for change. Nevertheless, their institutional autonomy and opportunities for strategic development are affected by various constraints imposed by national level authorities and different pressures for change coming from the European level.

Being seen as prime knowledge institutions, the universities are expected to find a balance between academic excellence and socio-economic relevance and therefore adapt to rapidly changing policies (national and European) in different knowledge sectors. This introduces a vertical dynamics – between different governance levels (institutional, national, European), as well as a horizontal dynamics – between different policy sectors, or between different settings in which knowledge is developed, transmitted and refined. In addition to this, universities are expected to become “strategic organisational actors” (Georg Krücken & Meier, 2006; Whitley, 2008) given the extension of the “room to manoeuvre”, i.e. increase in different aspects of institutional autonomy introduced, for a variety of reasons and in a variety of ways, through governance reforms, often in response to European pressures (see for example EC, 2003).

Theoretical and methodological issues

The panel takes as its starting point three challenges for studying the change dynamics of universities in Europe already identified in the literature (Gornitzka, Maassen, Olsen, & Stensaker, 2007):

1. Mapping changes that took place in universities, in particular (a) what has changed in the areas of organization and governance and is there a common trend in these changes, (b) what is the relationship between changes in rhetoric and changes practice or between changes in structure and changes in culture, and (c) how significant are these changes?
2. Mapping processes linked to European integration in higher education, in particular the development of policy making capacity on the European level, including intergovernmental (e.g. the Bologna Process) and supranational (e.g. the EU’s Lisbon Strategy and its Horizon 2020 successor) initiatives.
3. Exploring the relationship between changes in universities and European integration, or, more explicitly, to what extent and in what way various European integration efforts can be used as a key independent variable for change in higher education.

The panel will focus on the benefits as well as challenges in addressing these issues through combining several theoretical approaches in the three projects. The foundation are studies on organisational change from the institutional, resource dependence and strategic choice perspective,

(Brunsson & Olsen, 1997; Maassen & Olsen, 2007; March & Olsen, 1984; Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003), including those particularly focusing on environmental pressures coming from the European level (Radaelli, 2003; Sedelmeier, 2011). This is complemented by studies focusing on higher education as a knowledge intensive enterprise, both in terms of organizational and governance aspects as well as in terms of knowledge cultures (Becher & Trowler, 2001; Gornitzka & Maassen, 2000; Knorr-Cetina, 1999; Georg Krücken et al., 2007) as well as studies focusing on the changing pact between higher education and society, including the role of higher education in regional development and implications for institutional autonomy (Cloete, Bailey, Pillay, Bunting, & Maassen, 2011; Hölttä, 2000; Olsen, 2007). Here the focus is how to adequately take account of the “complex ecology of actors, processes and determinants” (Gornitzka et al., 2007, p. 190) in order to go beyond the usual focus on incremental change and layering when accounting for change processes, in particular change processes that span several governance layers and touch upon more than one policy sector. In addition, the idea is not to focus only on environmental pressures for change, but also open up the possibility for exploring the role of internal factors, both as impediments and facilitators of change.

In addition, the panel will also explore the research design and methodological aspects of trying to address the three challenges presented above. The projects that serve as the basis for this panel are all comparative studies founded on within case analysis on various levels (macro, meso and micro) and employing a variety of instruments to collect and analyse data (including document analysis and interviews with crucial respondents, such as decision makers at various levels as well as practitioners on the “shop floor”). By including Norway (non-member), several member states and several new members and candidate countries from the Western Balkans, the projects have the potential to provide ample empirical material to address, amongst other, the puzzle of persisting diversity of national and institutional arrangements faced with a common set of higher education change drivers at the international (European) level.

Panel discussion outline

After briefly presenting and discussing theoretical and methodological aspects of the three projects, the idea is to actively engage the audience in the discussion of a number of inter-related questions relevant for the higher education research community. For example:

1. At times of frenzy about “all things European” from policy makers and research alike, what do we actually know about how European change drivers affect research intensive universities?

2. What are the other change drivers influencing these universities, internal or external and how do these change drivers actually bring about change?
3. What is the importance, if any, of particular national characteristics when it comes to changes in governance, organization and autonomy? Does the country's official status with respect to the EU and its possibilities for uploading policy preferences (Börzel, 2003) matter for the change dynamics?
4. What is the relationship between (a) organisational settings and institutional characteristics of research intensive universities and political, socio-economic and cultural similarities and differences between countries in which these universities operate and (b) change processes in these universities and countries?

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