



**UiO** • **Faculty of Educational Sciences**  
University of Oslo

# **Flagship Project**

## **Institutional Autonomy in Higher Education**

### **“The Living Autonomy”**

PhD Workshop Belgrade 14th of May, 2013  
“Institutional governance and management in higher education:  
Continuities, changes and challenges”



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# Living autonomy in higher education

**1.HE studies at UiO**

**2.Flagship Project**

**3.In universities/HEIs: definitions and dimensions**

**4.Autonomy in Public Administration**

**5.“Living autonomy”**

**6.Conclusions**

# 1. HE Studies at University of Oslo (Faculty of Education)

- **Three academic core areas:**
  1. HE Governance and Policy Studies
  2. Studies on Teaching and Learning in HEIs
  3. HE and Professional Learning studies
- **Research Group HEIK (around 25 academic staff members)**  
Higher Education: Institutional dynamics and Knowledge cultures  
<http://www.uv.uio.no/english/research/groups/heik/index.html>
- **Mphil Programme in HE**
- **PhD Programme in Higher education and Professional Learning**

## Current research projects (external funding), include:

- 1. NORGLOBAL:** strengthen the basis for evidence based policy making in higher education and research in the countries of the Western Balkans (WBC).
- 2. HORIZON:** produce new knowledge about challenges that arise from **horizontal governance and change processes in higher education**, and their way of fostering academic and professional development
- 3. HERANA/NORHED:** Research and Development to Strengthen Expertise on Higher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa, with special focus on Contribution of African Flagship universities to economic development
- 4. FLAGSHIP:** produce insights into the way in which selected flagship universities in Europe interpret and use their '**institutional autonomy**' in creating a balance between strengthening their academic excellence and securing the socio-economic relevance of their academic activities

## **FLAGSHIP project**

**Formal Title: European Flagship Universities; balancing academic excellence and socio-economic relevance**

### Focus on

- Interpretation and actual use of (increased) autonomy inside Flagship universities in small Northern/Western European countries
- Focus on personnel policies and research excellence
- Emphasis in second phase on intra-institutional governance relationships: 'Living autonomy'

## **FLAGSHIP project (cont.)**

### **'Flagship university':**

A comprehensive, research intensive university, located in one of its country's largest urban areas. A flagship university is in general among the oldest and largest institutions for higher learning of its country.

### **First phase cases (11):**

Universities of:

Oslo, Bergen (Norway); Aarhus, Copenhagen (Denmark); Gothenburg, Stockholm (Sweden); Helsinki (Finland); Amsterdam (Netherlands); KU Leuven (Belgium); Zurich (Switzerland); Vienna (Austria)

## Autonomy and Higher Education: classical definitions

Autonomy is the power to govern without outside controls.

- Substantive autonomy is the power of the university as an organization to determine its own goals and programs (the “what” of academe).
- Procedural autonomy is the power of the university as an organization to determine the means by which its goals and programs will be pursued (the “how” of academe).

Berdahl et al. 1971, Berdahl 1990

Autonomy is:

- The location of authority somewhere within the university
- The university control over components of institutional self-government

Levy 1980

## University associations' definitions

### International Association of Universities - IAU

Autonomy is the necessary degree of independence from external interference that the university requires in respect of:

- its internal organization and governance
- the internal distribution of financial resources
- the generation of income from non-public sources,
- the recruitment of its staff,
- the setting of the conditions of study
- the freedom to conduct teaching and research.

### European University Association - EUA (Estermann and Nokkala 2009)

Autonomy relates to the constantly changing relations between the state and higher education institutions and the degree of control exerted by the state, depending on the national context and circumstances.

## Estermann et al. 2011 (EUA report II)

Organisational autonomy	Financial autonomy	Staffing autonomy	Academic autonomy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Selection procedure for the executive head</li> <li>• Selection criteria for the executive head</li> <li>• Dismissal of the executive head</li> <li>• Term of office of the executive head</li> <li>• Inclusion and selection of external members in governing bodies</li> <li>• Capacity to decide on academic structures</li> <li>• Capacity to create legal entities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Length and type of public funding</li> <li>• Ability to keep surplus</li> <li>• Ability to borrow money</li> <li>• Ability to own buildings</li> <li>• Ability to charge tuition fees for national/ EU students (BA, MA, PhD)</li> <li>• Ability to charge tuition fees for non-EU students (BA, MA, PhD)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Capacity to decide on recruitment procedures (senior academic/senior administrative staff)</li> <li>• Capacity to decide on salaries (senior academic/ senior administrative staff)</li> <li>• Capacity to decide on dismissals (senior academic/senior administrative staff)</li> <li>• Capacity to decide on promotions (senior academic/ senior administrative staff)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Capacity to decide on overall student numbers</li> <li>• Capacity to select students (BA, MA)</li> <li>• Capacity to introduce programmes (BA, MA, PhD)</li> <li>• Capacity to terminate programmes</li> <li>• Capacity to choose the language of instruction (BA, MA)</li> <li>• Capacity to select quality assurance mechanisms and providers</li> <li>• Capacity to design content of degree programmes</li> </ul>

## **Autonomy in public administration: definition**

(Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson 2000)

Autonomy means that the public agency is hierarchically subordinated to only a small part of its environment.

- The public agency is transformed into a legally independent organization
- It takes decisions
- It owns/controls resources and boundaries
  - It employs staff according to its conditions
  - It decides over the items of the budget and has (greater) control over resource allocations and operations
- It determines to a large extent the division of labour among professional groups.

## Autonomy: power to decide and freedom from constraints

1. Autonomy is the level of decision-making competencies of the agency, i.e. the extent to which the agency can decide itself about matters it finds important.
2. Autonomy is also the exemption of constraints on the actual use of decision-making competencies of the agency. It refers to structural, financial, legal and interventional constraints. E.g. how executives are hired (and fired), how the level of funding is decided, how much control on results can be introduced.

(Verhoest et al. 2004)

## Inherent assumptions in reforms strengthening autonomy

1. The performance of public agencies can be enhanced through:
  - Granting more managerial autonomy (i.e. the agency has input control on financial and human resources )

The government balances this by:

- Imposing external output control
- Using financial incentives
- Promoting competition.

2. Autonomy is beneficial because it brings specialization and the consequent superior performance (efficiency and effectiveness).

But:

- What about non rational behavior, e.g. isomorphism?
- What if autonomy is formally granted, but in reality constrained?
- What if output control, financial incentives and competition are not leading to the “desired”/agreed upon result?

## Empirical findings on autonomy

- Formal legal status is not an appropriate measure of autonomy: no linear relation, heterogeneity within same formal legal status
- Autonomy is multidimensional
- Tensions may occur between different dimensions of autonomy. E.g. policy autonomy needs managerial autonomy; decision-making competencies vs. financial autonomy

Flemish government organizations  
(Verhoest et al. 2004)

## Empirical findings on government control

When institutional autonomy is increased:

- Governments change (not decrease) their mechanisms of control
- Governments introduce more (not less) political steering
- Political salience explains the degree of control the government exercises
- Financial autonomy protects more than culture or legal status against external interventions
- If (already existing) autonomy is high, then resistance to change in autonomy is high

Social security UK, NL, FI, SE  
(Caulfield 2004)

**BUT,**

**the university/HE as well as the general public administration literature on autonomy is dominated by attempts to conceptualise the formal governance (or steering) relationship between state authorities and HE institutions.**

**How about ‘the living autonomy’, i.e. the way in which the changes in the formal governance relationship between state authorities and HEIs are perceived, interpreted, translated, operationalised and used inside the HEIs?**

## On universities

It was always a bit of a lie that universities were self-governing institutions. Nevertheless, what universities suffered during the 1980s and 1990s was pretty shameful, as under threat of having their funding cut they allowed themselves to be turned into business enterprises, in which professors who had previously carried on their enquiries in sovereign freedom were transformed into harried employees required to fulfil quotas under the scrutiny of professional managers. Whether the old powers of the professoriate will ever be restored is much to be doubted.

## On universities (cont.)

In the days when Poland was under Communist rule, there were dissidents who conducted night classes in their homes, running seminars on writers and philosophers excluded from the official canon (for example, Plato). No money changed hands, although there may have been other forms of payment.

If the spirit of the university is to survive, something along those lines may have to come into being in countries where tertiary education has been wholly subordinated to business principles.

In other words, the real university may have to move into people's homes and grant degrees for which the sole backing will be the names of the scholars who sign the certificates.

## On universities

J.M. Coetzee

Diary of a Bad Year (2007)

pp. 35-36

## Conceptualizing "living autonomy": tensions

Thesis: university "new formal autonomy" has diminished "old actual autonomy"

Ministries have many formal strings attached through:

- scrutiny/control
- incentive systems
- performance management systems

Academics see themselves under double attack from increased formalization and management orientation with respect to

- the ministry
- the growing internal management component.

(Christensen 2011)

## Conceptualizing Living Autonomy (cont.)

Universities are becoming more autonomous from Ministries wrt financial, management and decision-making matters, at least formally.

At the same time, they are exposed to more accountability wrt reporting, scrutiny, control systems, as well as to financial incentive systems and pressure to get diversified resources.

(Christensen 2011; Gornitzka and Maassen 2000)

However, universities seem not to be responding to reforms as other public administration units (Christensen 2011). This is because:

- University is a specific organization whose technology is ambiguous and unclear

(Musselin 2007; Whitley 2008)

- University is a specific 'institution' thus it is more difficult to change (Maassen and Olsen 2007; Kezar and Eckel 2004)

## Provisional conclusions: the shifting concept of autonomy

Institutional autonomy was traditionally linked to

- Academic freedom, that is freedom of the individual scholar in his/her teaching and research to pursue truth wherever it seems to lead without fear of punishment or termination of employment for having offended some political religious or social orthodoxy (Berdahl 1991, Ashby 1966).
- Academic self-government in matters of students, staff, standards and degrees, curricula  
(Ashby 1966, 323)

Institutional autonomy has been restated since the 1990s as a series of operational conditions and functions beyond its ethical and philosophical axiom. It is by redefining the relation between autonomy and accountability that this has been done.

(Neave 2001)

## The shifting concept of autonomy

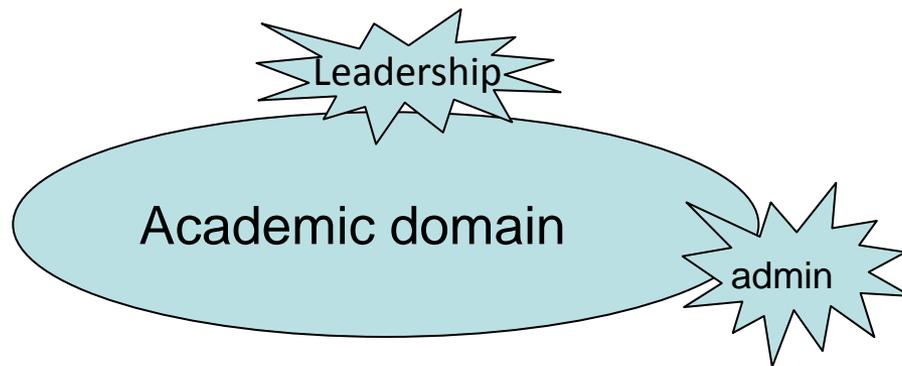
More recently (NPM reforms) autonomy has been argued to become a necessary condition for universities to become excellent. Thereby different dimensions are alluded: performance, responsiveness to markets and to various stakeholders, strategic positioning through differentiation.

This redefinition, which matches the rationale of reforms in the public administration, favors the 'organizational dimension' in contrast to academics, i.e. the professionals.

Organizational coherence	vs.	Loosely coupled systems
Organizational identity	vs.	Academic identities
Managerial values	vs.	Academic values

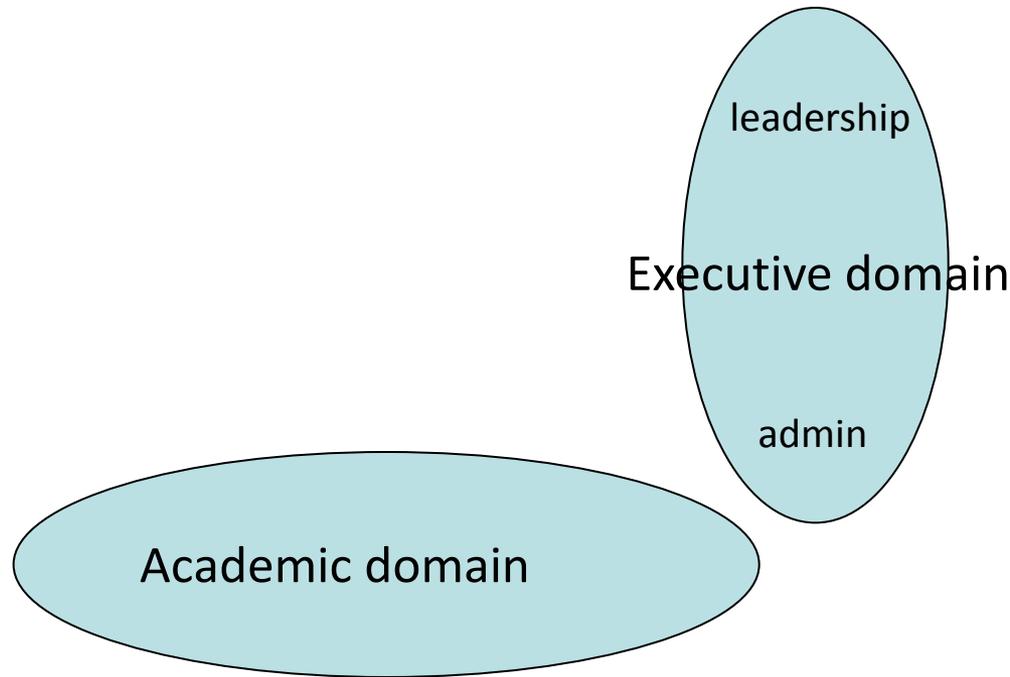
**What does this mean in the institutional practice in HE?**

## Traditional univ governance structure



- Academic self-governance
- Symbolic leadership
- Administration necessary  
evil

## Modern univ governance structure



- Professional leadership, management, administration in executive domain
- Institutional autonomy only integrated in executive domain
- 'Management' externally oriented, mainly symbolic internally
- Continuous academic autonomy
- Growing tensions between room to manoeuvre in academic domain and hierarchical decision making structure in executive domain

## Preliminary issues of attention in analyses of data and interviews

- 1. Major tension not between excellence and relevance, but first between education, research and 'third mission', and second between autonomy of academic domain vs growing interference of executive domain with academic autonomy**
- 2. Personnel policies (HRM) core strategic area**
- 3. Challenging balance between research orientation in both university worlds, and basic funding realities**
- 4. Increased formal university autonomy leads to reduced room to manoeuvre for academic staff**
- 5. Professionalisation of administration leads in general to less effective support structure for academic activities**

**Thank you very much for your attention!**