

Abstract

Global and European political shifts are having an impact on the present and future of Nordic universities, including ideals of institutional autonomy. The aim of this paper is to explore the status of governance, and central policy ideas that have shaped reforms and institutional change at Danish universities since the millennium. On the one hand the article explores how powerful policy ideas have shaped the development of Danish higher education policy, and on the other hand, how such ideas are received in very different ways by the sector and the institutions. The article unravels the history of the reform of the Danish higher education system of the past two decades, as two parallel ideational streams in policy development. The first ideational stream revolves around the relation between state and institutions, and the second centres on the relation between the national and the global. Focusing on recent developments, the article demonstrates that the range of possible sector and university responses towards centrally initiated reforms and initiatives varies significantly. The article suggests that these variations must be seen in the light of the universities struggling to come to terms with their position as self-governing institutions, including defining and exploiting their space for agency.

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Introduction

As a European institution, the university has preserved many of its societal roles and functions over the course of history (de Ridder-Symoens & Rüegg, 1992-2011). Meanwhile, the political world in which universities operate seems to be undergoing a perceptible change (Douglass, 2021). Global and European political shifts are having an impact on the present and future of Nordic universities, including ideals of institutional autonomy. The aim of this paper is

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to explore central policy ideas that have shaped reforms and institutional change at Danish universities since the millennium.

With their origins as international institutions in medieval Europe and their rebirth as institutions based on the nation state in the 19th century, historically, universities have been at the forefront of both national agendas and European integration as well as being institutions engaged in both fundamental and practice-related research. The modern university has played a crucial role in educating future civil servants, political scientists, jurists and political leaders, thus becoming a significant building block for the establishment of the Westphalian nation states and subsequently a vehicle for forming national bureaucracies (de Ridder-Symoens & Rüegg, 1992-2011). Later, the role of the universities transformed from the consolidation of elites to mass education, becoming an important tool in educating young people to meet the needs and demands of the labour market. This process involved a strengthening of international collaboration following the initiation of the Bologna Process in 1999 (Brøgger, 2022).

Close collaboration through organisations and bodies such as UNESCO, the OECD and the EU, established to maintain peace in Europe in the aftermath of World War II, have been of great importance for contemporary Nordic universities. They all contributed profoundly to an era of unprecedented internationalisation following the war. Especially the EU holds a prominent position in the transformations of European and Nordic higher education. Since the launch of the Bologna reforms and the implementation of the EU's growth strategy in 2000, the architecture of European higher education and research has been altered. The transformation from collegial governance towards professional and managerial models, along with the implementation of predominantly Anglo-Saxon educational standards is well-documented and contemporaneous with the implementation of New Public Management reforms in the public sector in Denmark as well as across Europe (Brøgger, 2019; Degn & Sørensen, 2015; Lawn & Grek, 2012; Ørberg & Wright, 2019; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

In the following sections, the article studies the development of the Danish higher education system over the past two decades by exploring two separate, but connected, questions; how powerful policy ideas have shaped the development of Danish higher education policy? And how such ideas are received by institutions and sectorial stakeholders? The article will discuss how these variations must be seen in light of the universities struggle to come to terms with their new position as self-governing institutions, including through defining and exploiting their space for agency.

Theoretical Framework

In order to understand how new (and old) agendas have (re)emerged in the Danish Higher Education system, we base our inquiry on new institutional theory and particularly on the newest strands of this theoretical approach, which focuses explicitly on policy ideas and how they change as they move (Béland & Cox, 2010; Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996; Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008). Within this framework, ideas are to be understood as *“normative and causal beliefs, working within a dynamic network of other ideas, establishing goals and means by which*

these goals can legitimately be obtained" (Degn, 2015), and are thereby, for example, beliefs concerning the role and purpose of science, of universities, of education and of knowledge, and the conditions under which these purposes are best achieved. Ideational institutionalism is thus founded on the assumption derived from classic organisational institutionalism, that problems and solutions are not given, but malleable and changes when linked to new problem definitions or solutions (Gornitzka, 2013). The first part of the analysis uses the ideational framework to explore and examine how different policy ideas gain traction in national development over time, and how these ideas link problem definition and policy solution together in new constellations.

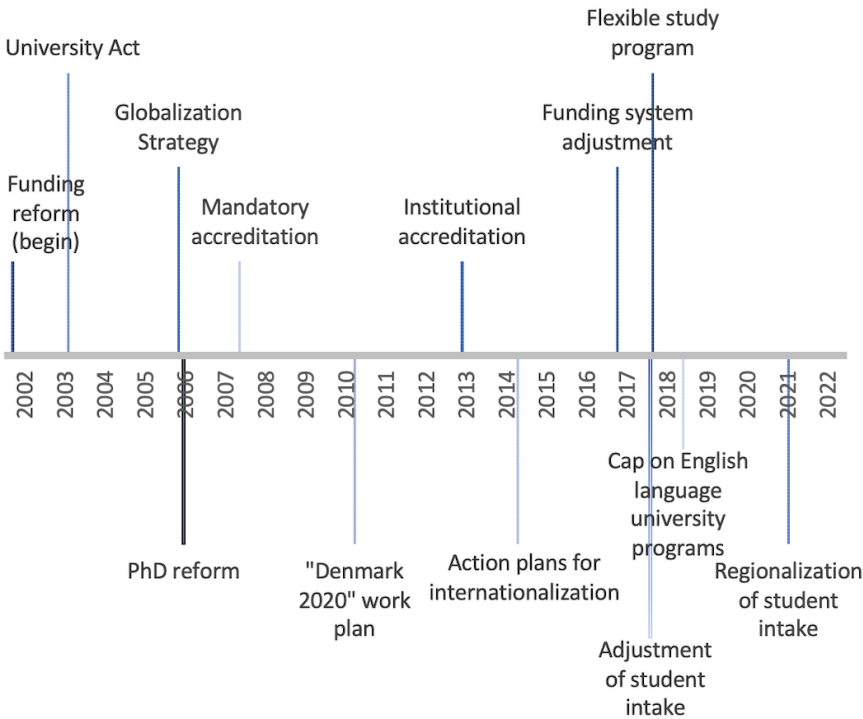
The ideational institutionalist perspective assumes a dialectic relationship between actors and structures, emphasising that actors, e.g. higher education institutions or national policy makers, can and do act strategically to further perceived (constructed) interests. A similar argument is presented by Gornitzka (2013), who, inspired by Oliver (Oliver, 1991), carves out three response strategies applied by national policy makers in relation to external pressures; channelling, filtering and buffering. Oliver herself argued that the behaviours of organisations (e.g. higher education institutions) "*vary from passive conformity to active resistance in response to institutional pressure, depending on the nature and context of the pressures themselves*" (Oliver, 1991). In the present study, we follow this point of departure and explore responses at both national policy level and organisational level in order to see how strategy is influenced by the existing ideational network (Degn, 2015). In this way, new ideas trigger new perceptions and constructions of future situations, which in turn leads to possible reformulations of interests and goals (Rhodes, Binder, & Rockman, 2008).

Methods

In order to pursue constitutive policy ideas that have shaped the development of the Danish higher education system over the past two decades, the article forms a meta-analysis in two ways: Firstly, we identify and analyse key studies, from the period of the early 2000s and up until today, of the entanglements between international and national higher education policy and implications of institutional change. Focus will be on research into (a) the international-national policy nexus, (b) the national-institutional policy and implementation nexus, and (c) the institutional-praxis nexus. Secondly, we support our meta-analysis of earlier studies with key examples drawn directly from the data sources of earlier and ongoing research projects conducted by the authors, including European and Danish policy documents and processes such as strategies, communiqués, parliamentary procedures, negotiations, bills, and official reports. The core sample of material is drawn from a) previous studies on the implementation of the Bologna reforms and the NPM transformation of the public sector in Denmark, including the universities, b) pilot studies and ongoing studies on the turn towards national solutions, including the rise of what might be called new nationalisms and national protectionist agendas. In this article, the primary sources are national legal regulations such as the University Act from 2003, and former and current national policy initiatives such as the Globalisation strategy from 2006, the adjustment of English language university programs in 2018 and the agreement to relocate a number of Danish higher education degree programs

in 2021. To a lesser extent, the material also includes interviews with key administrative staff from Danish executives. The respondents include current and former officials from The Ministry of Higher Education and Science and its central administrative predecessors. The interviews were conducted in Copenhagen between August 2018 and February 2019. Our meta-analytic approach has been inspired by Tight's (2019) recent meta-analysis of core challenges and unsolved issues within higher education research, together with McAlpine and Amundsen's (2018) recent development of the nested context approach across policy-institutional-practice dimensions, and a conceptualisation of the global-local nexus inspired by the 'Policy borrowing and lending approach' (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012). Below a visualisation of the main policy initiatives of the period is presented.

Figure 1: Visual representation of policy initiatives presented in this paper, arranged chronologically



The article will proceed as follows: we begin by addressing the first research question, which relates to how central policy ideas have influenced the changing architecture of Danish universities in the context of Europe. In this initial analysis, we use the ideational framework to unfold two parallel policy developments by understanding them as ideational streams. This first analysis provides the basis for the subsequent analysis, which addresses the second research question and how the sector as such and the individual universities work with the complexities of contradictory policy ideas and how this has real, material consequences for university education and research.

Changing the Architecture of Danish Universities

The Danish higher education system has – like most other European national systems of higher education – been reformed significantly over the past decades, with a particularly intense phase at the beginning of the millennium. Although sometimes described as one of the Scandinavian “hesitant reformers” protecting national sensitivity and reluctant to give up sovereignty on national education policy (Christensen & Lægheid, 2007; Corbett, 2005; European Commission, 2006), Denmark has since the turn of the millennium by no means been dragging its feet, when reforming the higher education sector.

The reformatory zeal dates back to the initial democratisation reforms of the 1970s, but gained pace with the international NPM-inspired reforms of the new millennium following the initiation of the Bologna Process. Through the Bologna Process, Denmark became an active member of the European Higher Education Area characterised by educational comparability, mobility, qualification frameworks and accreditation procedures (Brøgger, 2019). The Bologna-initiated reforms were designed to support flexibility and employability for European students and faculty and were based on predominantly Anglo-Saxon output-oriented standards for study programs and curricula and were in compliance with the ambitions of the right-wing coalition government at the time to break with the design of former education systems. The reforms transformed the entire architecture of European higher education, including structure of study programs and the design of curriculum and served, to a certain extent, as externalisation of domestic reform needs in Denmark (Brøgger, 2019; Schriewer & Martinez, 2004; Steiner-Khamsi, 2012).

In the following, we will unfold the reform history of the Danish higher education system over the past two decades as two parallel ideational streams in policy development. The first ideational stream revolves around *the relation between state and institutions*, and the second centres on *the relation between the national and the global*.

From state-steering, via self-governance to self-responsibilisation of political priorities

Self-governance and self-responsibilisation

As a starting point for narrating the recent history of policy reform in Danish higher education, the University Act of 2003 (Act no. 778 of 07/08/2019), can in many ways be seen as the key turning point. The Act became part of a general reorganisation of the bureaucratic system and public administration and thus imbedded in the New Public Management reform wave spearheaded by the Ministry of Finance since the 1980s (Ejersbo and Greve 2005). The Act closed down collegiate, governing bodies such as the University Senate (konsistorium) and Faculty Councils (fakultetsråd) and in consequence stripped the collegiate bodies of all authority with the exception of the study boards implemented with the Administration Act in 1970. To replace these bodies, the Act introduced professionalised management structures, including governing boards with external majority and appointed (not elected) leaders. The Act also introduced so-called ‘self-ownership’. Overall, the University Act, often referred to as the

‘2003 University reform’ targeted mainly two areas: 1) the relationship between the state and the institutions, by transforming the legal status of the universities and moving the institutions from state-owned to self-owning and self-governing institutions, and 2) the internal management structures, which were, as mentioned, transformed from collegiate and elected systems to professional management structures (Degn & Sørensen, 2015). As a consequence of the University Act, the universities became formally self-governing institutions decoupled from the ministerial hierarchy and thus independent of direct state interference, and primarily regulated through sector-specific laws and regulations (Brøgger & Madsen, 2022; Ministry of Finance, 2009; Ørberg & Wright, 2019). The ‘2003 University reform’ was heavily influenced by ideas of accountability, but also aimed at responsabilising institutions in terms of finances, and by placing responsibility e.g. for academic freedom, within the institutions themselves (Degn, 2015). The relation between the state and the higher education institutions in the 2000s was thereby initially characterised by increased autonomy, professionalisation and contractualisation. However, the degree of autonomy has since been much debated, and the extent to which so-called self-ownership or self-governance has led to increased institutional autonomy has been questioned. Today, the Ministry of Higher Education and Science defines the overall sector-specific regulations, including regulations concerning the admission of students, the structure of study programs, and the programs offered. The universities are in turn independent and self-governing when it comes to internal financial and strategic priorities, as well as how to organise and design study programs (Brøgger & Madsen, 2022). Despite the implementation of formal self-governance, universities are thereby still governed centrally in two ways: a) by government-initiated reforms, such as the adjustment of student intake in higher education programs implemented in 2015, and b) by state-based policy instruments such as yearly inspections, strategic framework contracts and an external quality assurance procedure known as accreditation used, in effect, to centrally regulate higher education.

The implementation of a wide range of influential policy instruments are indicative of a movement towards stronger responsabilisation of higher education institutions. This is particularly evident in the case of quality assurance, where universities have become increasingly responsabilised in the development and consolidation of accreditation procedures. Partly driven forward by the European Bologna reform movement, accreditation of higher education became a legal requirement in Denmark in 2007. With the implementation of the Accreditation Act in 2013, the system changed from program accreditation to institutional accreditation. While the Ministry of Higher Education and Science is responsible for implementing the Act, the Act itself places responsibility for ensuring the quality of higher education on the institutions and their management. Institutional accreditation implies that universities are required to establish their own institutional quality assurance system and these new requirements enrol institutions as standard-setting agents and thus co-producers of accreditation policy. Being the responsible institution, universities actively need to set standards and incorporate them into their own practice. In this way, accreditation now seems less of a top-down procedure having placed the responsibility at the institutional level. However, universities can design their own quality assurance

systems only as long as they fully comply with the nationally defined criteria based on the European Standards and Guidelines (Brøgger & Madsen, 2022).

University funding and labour market demands

As demonstrated, a central idea which formed the relations between the state and the institutions was one of responsabilisation/accountability. However, another important idea which emerges in the policies in the 2000s and 2010s is the idea of *labour market needs*; an idea which is, e.g., visible in the adjustment of student intake initiative mentioned above. The adjustment of student intake was designed to transfer student admission from programs with higher unemployment among graduates to programs, which have better employment prospects. In particular, this reform had consequences for study program within the humanities and social sciences and the initiative has been much debated. The idea of the labour market as a salient category in higher education policy also manifests itself in a reform of the funding system, including a transition from primarily being funded by block funding to increasing the share of competitively allocated funding (Aagaard, Hansen, & Rasmussen, 2016; Degn, 2015; Degn & Sørensen, 2015). The transformations of the funding system were amplified with a new broad political agreement in 2017 between the former Danish right-wing coalition government in office and the parliament. The new funding system was effective from 1 January 2019. This reform of the funding system for higher education was based on three elements: Basic funding, activity funding and result funding. Part of the ambition with the new funding system was to ensure a better transition to the workforce upon completion of studies (Ministry of Higher Education and Science, 2017). The result funding was calculated on the basis of completion and graduate employment at the institutional level and was implemented as an overall source of funding to institutions, inclusive of funds for quality initiatives.

Tying the funding system of universities to graduate employment was but one initiative in a wide range of centrally driven initiatives orienting universities towards the labour market needs in this period. Over the course of the years, the Bologna initiated reforms were supplemented with initiatives designing study programs to better support employability. In 2018, the previous mentioned government in office came up with the proposal 'Flexible study program for the future'. The proposal was prepared by the Committee for better university study programs (DK: Udvalg om bedre universitetsuddannelser) recommending more flexible study programs and that study programs should be designed to better meet the demands of the labour market (Ministry of higher Education and Science; Committee on better university study programs, 2018). The latter recommendation supported the already existing initiative on adjusting the student intake in higher education programs implemented in 2015. Even though the initiative was in line with the original Bologna ambition to enhance employability among students, the initiative also reflected new tendencies. For the first time since the ratification of the Bologna Process, a reform initiative was based on developing a so-called Danish study program model going against the European three-cycle system by introducing a new one-year master's program and a master's degree program for working professionals (a four-year part-time degree program designed for people with a job), later reinforced by

recommendations put forward by the so-called ‘Reform Commission’ (Reform Commission, 2022). In this way, the idea of labour market needs was tied together with a re-nationalisation idea, focusing on national excellence and a problematisation of “the European”. These re-nationalising tendencies will be addressed in the following sections.

The labor market idea did not only impact the design and content of study programs, it also heavily influenced research. This became particularly visible in the PhD reform of 2006, which explicitly aimed at increasing the number of PhD students in Danish universities (Danish Government, 2006). Since the inception of the PhD-order and doctoral education in Denmark in 1992, the enrolment of PhD-students at Danish universities have increased significantly. With the Globalisation Strategy of 2006, it was decided that investment in research in Denmark should be heavily intensified to increase economic growth and innovation. Consequently, doctoral education has been tied increasingly closer to agendas concerning professionalisation, quality assurance, innovation, and entrepreneurship (Andres et al., 2015; Gokhberg, Shmatko, & Auriol, 2016; Pedersen & Stjernfelt, 2016). The ambition was fulfilled by implementing an increase in the block-funding to the universities, earmarked for PhD fellowships. This instrument was particularly aimed at tying university research closer to business and industry, and an explicit aim was to strengthen the transition from PhD to the private and public labour market.

The reform initiatives mentioned above – the University Act, the Accreditation Act, the new funding system, increased regulation of the student intake, the flexible study program and the PhD reform – all illustrate a development of the relation between state and institutions; initially by introducing an idea of self-governance and increasing the responsabilisation. In later years, this has also manifested by a further tightening of the central administration of the universities, in particular with regard to the steering (and dimensioning) of educational programs and by increasing the self-responsibilisation of the institutions to meet political priorities. The idea of the labour market was highly influential in this re-tightening of the relation between the state and the university. There is, however, also a parallel ideational stream that influenced the higher education policy development, focusing more on the relation between the national and the international.

From sector-capacity building via internationalisation to national protectionism

The Globalisation Strategy of 2006 and the Denmark 2020 ambitions

Prior to the Bologna process and the intense reformation of the Danish higher education sector in the new millennium, the sector was to some extent characterised by what we might call “sector-capacity building”. In the 1970s new, entrepreneurial university centres emerged experimenting with new pedagogical forms and concepts, while also serving the purpose of regionalising higher education by moving higher education out of the largest cities. The policy development of the 1980s and the early 1990s was to some extent directed at striking a balance between the democratisation ideals of the 1970s and the bureaucratic inefficiencies accompanying these (Degn, 2015). The centre of

attention in this period was thereby characterised by the establishment of “a sector” and by the construction of efficient and cooperative institutions. However, from the initiation of the Bologna Process in 1999 and the implementation of the University Act in 2003 up until the migration crisis in 2015, higher education policy in Denmark became heavily influenced by a powerful idea of internationalisation and reforms supporting the alignment of higher education with the European Higher Education Area. Particularly, the Globalisation Strategy from 2006 plays a key role in this endeavour to position Denmark in a European and global landscape. In April 2005, the Liberal-Conservative government appointed a corporative expert committee, the Globalisation Council, to deliver advice concerning a strategy for Denmark in the global economy. The Council was headed by the Prime Minister himself. The work of the Globalisation Council resulted in a large-scale strategy promoting the goal of making Denmark a front-runner in the global economy (Danish Government, 2006). Internationalisation of higher education and research became a crucial element of the strategy and was closely related to benchmarks of the ensuing Lisbon agenda and the Bologna Process (Borrás & Peters, 2011; Interview A). Overall, the strategy emphasised a competitive higher education area based on international standards, lifelong learning and global perspectives. The strategy also promoted the Danish higher education system internationally and aimed at attracting more international students, as these, contrary to the political perception ten years later, were considered a benefit to the Danish society (Danish Government, 2006; Interview B). A permanent advisory board for internationalisation of university study programs was even established in continuation of this strategy (Clausen & Brøgger, 2020).

Following the 2006 Globalisation Strategy, a general work plan for economic growth and welfare until 2020 was presented by the Liberal-Conservative government in 2010, the so-called “*Denmark 2020*” work plan (Danish Government, 2010). The plan was promoting 10 strategic goals, of which number four specified that at least one Danish university should be in Europe’s top 10 by 2020 and that all Danish universities should maintain or improve their international ranking positions. An increased internationalisation of the Danish universities was specifically pointed out as one of the main drivers to achieve these ambitions (Danish Government, 2010: 21). In 2012, Denmark simultaneously had the EU presidency and chaired the Bologna Process, which led to a substantial, though temporary, flow of resources into activities concerned with internationalisation (interview C; interview D). In 2013 and 2014 respectively, two related action plans for the internationalisation of higher education were presented by the government. They urged universities to raise the share of students studying or engaging in internships abroad as part of their studies to 50 % by 2020 (Danish Government, 2013, 2014).

European crisis and re-nationalising initiatives

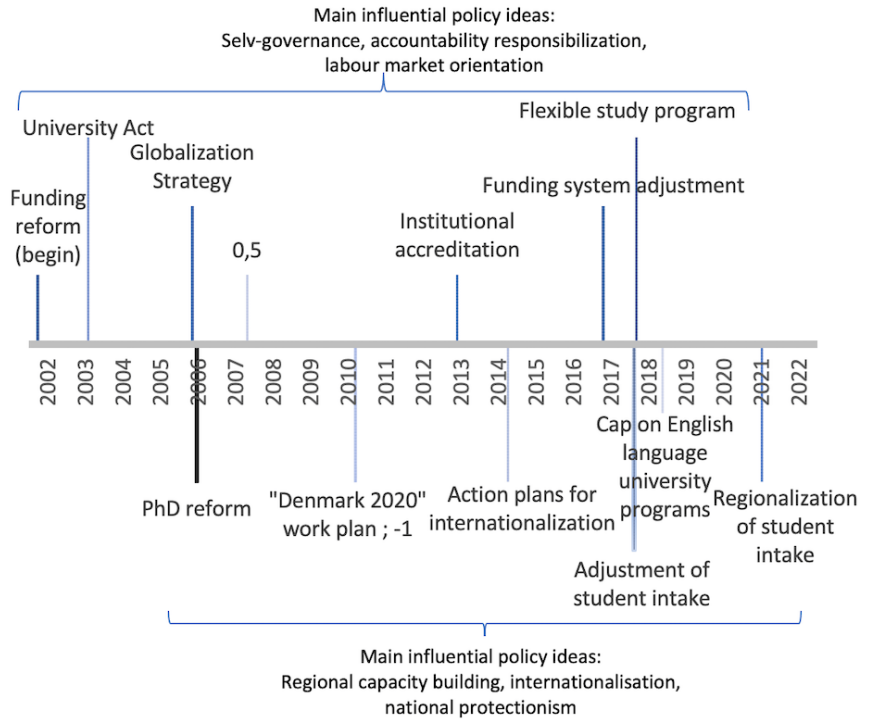
The internationalisation idea, however, lost legitimacy in the wake of the multiple crises recently afflicting the EU, such as the 2008 financial crisis and the migration crisis in 2015. EU authority was challenged through phenomena such as Brexit, the electoral progress of Euro-sceptic and far-right parties and the emergence of illiberal democracies in Hungary and Poland (Hobolt, 2015; Hutter

& Grande, 2014; Kriesi, 2014; Schmidt, 2019), paving the way for a new idea of re-nationalisation. Since the migration crisis in 2015, this idea and the associated intensified opposition against ‘the European’ started manifesting in Danish higher education policy, in particular, materialising as new practices in domains such as international engagement, practices concerning how and to what degree national politicians or governments influence, intervene in or restrict universities’ ability to engage with the international community (Brøgger, 2022; Brøgger & Moscovitz, 2022). In Danish higher education, recent national policy initiatives targeting student mobility and the organisation of degree programmes reflect a national reordering of the political arrangements. Measures include the government-mandated reduction in the number of English-language university programmes, designed to reduce the number of foreign students, as well as the above-mentioned introduction of a one-year MA degree program and a four-year part-time MA degree program opposing the European three-cycle system (Ministry of Higher Education and Science, 2016, 2018a, 2018b). The reduction in the number of English-language university programmes will be elaborated in the section below. The idea of re-nationalisation can also be seen as emerging in one of the newest policy initiatives in Denmark, namely the recent agreement to regionalise higher education, by limiting the number of student intake in the larger cities and thereby forcing higher education institutions to either move study programs to smaller cities; creating satellite-campus, or closing down study places (Ministry of Higher Education and Science, 2021b). This attempt to link higher education policy to agendas concerning regionalisation has been heatedly debated, and several of the political parties behind the initiative later withdrew their support realising the critical responses from the higher education institutions.

Summary

In the previous sections, we have unfolded the recent history of policy reforms in Denmark – not chronologically, but organised as two overall ideational streams. This has emphasised how particularly two main idea-networks have been influential in changing the architecture of Danish universities. This is visualised in Figure 2 below, where the ideational stream relating to the relation between state and institutions is presented above the line and the second stream relating to the relation between the national and the global is presented below the line.

Figure 2: Visual representation of main policy initiatives and the policy ideas influencing them.



However, as mentioned in the section on the theoretical framework, a key assumption is the dialectic relationship between actors and structures, emphasising the possibility of agency but also the difficulties of exploiting the space for action. In the following sections, we therefore unfold two empirical examples of how institutions and other key actors have enacted their agency very differently, which shapes the evolving relation between the state and the institutions in new ways.

The Governance of Education and Research at Danish Universities

Nationalisation

As mentioned earlier, in the wake of the migration crisis in 2015, the centre-right government decided to cut the number of international students enrolled in Danish higher education programmes (Ministry of Higher Education and Science, 2016, 2018a). This decision was rooted in the co-called “*SU settlement for migrant workers*” from 2013¹. In many ways, the settlement was designed to meet the right-wing and national-conservative based critique put forward in the years prior to the 2015 Danish general election, of the growing number of international students in Denmark. National conservative parties strongly opposed the EU ruling from 21 February 2013 (C-46/12, L.N), in which the Court of Justice of the European Union affirmed that a European Union citizen who pursues a course of studies in a host Member State, whilst at the same time

pursuing employment activities, cannot be refused educational grants offered to the nationals of that Member State (Court of Justice of the European Union, 2013). Opposing this EU anti-discrimination ruling, the centre-left coalition government at the time made a political agreement with other parties in parliament to place a cap on SU spending for non-Danish students. The following government-mandated closure of a number of English-language courses at Danish universities must be seen in close connection to this ambition of reducing opportunities for foreign students to study in Denmark and in close connection to the political climate at the time (Brøgger, 2022).

Based on arguments rooted in economic and welfare state protectionism, the Ministry of Higher Education and Science announced the decision to reduce international student intake at Danish universities in August 2018. The decision mandated that approximately 1,200 student places in Danish universities' English-language bachelor's and master's degree programmes be cut. The line of reasoning underpinning the decision was presented as concerns with respect to the socioeconomic benefits of international students – quite opposite the rationale of the Globalisation Strategy several years prior. By reducing the international student intake, the government, along with the agreement parties, ignored the universities' protests. The universities opposed the decision arguing that the initiative would limit the universities opportunity to attract international talent. In a press release from *Universities Denmark*, Rector and Chairman of the Danish Rectors' Conference commented on the initiative, arguing that the reduction would benefit neither the Danish business community nor the Danish Universities (Universities Denmark, 2018). He further argued in favour of the socioeconomic benefits of international students and emphasised how universities were depending on their interaction and exchange with an international community of scholars. The press release was followed up by a joint statement from the chairmen of the university boards. They argued that the initiative potentially hampered the ability of the universities to attract and retain talent at Danish universities (Chairmen of the university boards, 2018). Despite these protests, the political agreement to cut the number of international students led to the closure of several master's degree programmes taught in English or a change in the language of instruction from English to Danish (Brøgger, 2022). This protectionist 'risk-management' approach have since become more mainstream. The agreement has been supported by the current government in office and a second round of reductions targeting university colleges and business academies was announced in the autumn 2021 (Ministry of Higher Education and Science, 2021a).

The institutional response to this national protectionism appeared mainly reactive, and the agency of the institutions came across as limited. In Olivers (1991) terminology, we might see this as an attempt of "bargaining", but with limited success, leading to compliance. Meanwhile, turning towards the regionalisation initiative previously mentioned, it seems the universities have widened their space for action and active response.

Regionalisation

The regionalisation-initiative was initially presented in 2020 under the headline "*Getting closer – more educational programs and strong local communities*"

(Danish Government, 2021). The central idea was that higher education was to work as a driver for increased regional development; an agenda which had been a key focus area for the Social Democratic government taking office in 2019. The means to this regionalisation were quite drastic: 7500 student places were to be established outside the major cities by re-opening vocational education programs, which had previously been centralised, and by moving study places from the universities – and to some extent from the University Colleges – to areas that are more rural (Danish Government, 2021). The incentive was that the universities were to either move 10 percent of their student places outside the major cities or cut those 10 percent. The initiative can thereby be seen to reactivate the idea of regional development, which was a very influential policy idea in the sector-capacity building phase, mentioned earlier, prior to the reforms in the new millennium. It was closely connected to other policy ideas and agendas, focusing on social inequalities, decentralisation and the support for “rural Denmark”. The initiative was presented shortly before the local and regional elections in 2021, and it was also thought by many to be part of a bid for the favour of the electorate in “rural Denmark”

The initiative faced major criticism from the universities from the beginning, and particularly the cost involved with moving study places and the difficulty of upholding a proper connection to the research environments was criticised. In line with the self-responsibilising idea of current higher education policy, the HEIs were encouraged to find and suggest potential solutions to the 10 percent move/cut demand. Following an intense debate, all universities as a collective submitted their suggested plan to the ministry in January 2021. These suggestions meant the closure of approximately 2000 student places and the relocation of approximately 2500 places. This meant that the universities – most likely as a strategic move – went very far in their translation of the political response, reducing far more and transferring far less study places than was expected by the political parties. This suggestion was a novelty in that it represented a (more or less) unified response from the Danish universities, through Universities Denmark, which has – as the previous example of the reduction in English-language programmes also demonstrates – historically been a fairly weak negotiation partner (Degn & Aagaard, 2020). This “weakness” can be attributed to the high differentiation in the sector, where the individual institutions have had markedly different interests and therefore little incentives to negotiate with the political system in unison. However, in this case, we see a stronger response from the sector to a political initiative, where the universities take a far more pro-active stance and enact their agency far more than previously seen. In Olivers (1991) terms, this can be seen as a case of defiance or even manipulation, where the sector attempts to contest the requirements and pressures put on them, and by doing so to manipulate the sources of that pressure. In the wake of this notable response, the parties behind the agreement reacted with surprise and several parties threatened to leave the agreement, if a more agreeable solution was not found. Following the negotiations between the ministry and the universities, an agreement was reached with more favourable economic conditions for the universities, though still with the prospects of grave consequences for studies and research, and where the reduce/move target had

been reduced from 10 percent to 6,4 percent. The changes are to be implemented before 2030.

Institutional tensions – and new responsibilities in research?

A final example of how Danish HEIs enact their agency in response to policy ideas, we find in the area of doctoral education and the expansion of this described also in the previous section. In this example, we move into the HEIs and explore how changing policy ideas both impact local practices and allow for individual agency.

Beginning already in the Nordic region in 1990s, and intensified in a Danish context up through the 2000s, doctoral education and the PhD experience an enhanced focus on generic competences and transferrable skills relevant for the job market, and an increased collaboration between the public and private sector was noted (Elmgren, Forsberg, Lindberg-Sand, & Sonesson, 2016; Gudmundsson, 2008). At the same time, coupling doctoral education and the PhD to the European Qualifications Framework, with the aim of increasing alignment, but also bench-marking and competition between universities in Denmark and internationally, has created some potential tensions including a dual focus with, on the one hand, an increased focus on employment for the wider job market and, at the same time, the development of core research skills and original knowledge to enhance the competition ability in international contexts. So, we see both an increased focus on internationalisation and mobility, while attempting to build strong research environments *at home universities in Denmark* (Andres et al., 2015, p. 7). As Cornér and her colleagues point out (Cornér, Pyhältö, Peltonen, & Bengtson, 2018, p. 2), even though national strategies for doctoral education and the PhD have been formalised and centralised policy-wise in Denmark, the institutional and curricular framing are, still, “*not as fixed and determined as in the UK and USA*”, which allows for “*room for maneuverment, negotiations and positioning struggles*” between various stakeholders including the policy-community, the industry and public organisations, institutional leaders, academic developers, doctoral supervisors, and doctoral students. So, while feeling the multiple pressures from a host of external stakeholders, the universities, and its members, do have the opportunity and power to assert their voices and define their own goals.

In Danish doctoral education today, there are different pulls moving the curriculum in different directions simultaneously; a tendency which has political threads back to the Globalisation Strategy of 2006 in terms the increased focus on both internationalisation and mobility, professionalisation and employment nationally, as well as contextualisation of doctoral research locally (Nerad & Evans, 2014). On the one hand, the goal of the PhD is to contribute with new and original knowledge to the discipline, or sub-discipline, and thus to become a future “*steward of the discipline*” (Golde & Walker, 2006). The increasing internationalisation of doctoral education in Denmark coupled with fewer permanent positions at Danish universities creates a growing precarity of contract-employed researchers without many options for advancing in the university system. This situation, on the other hand, has made policy makers and institutional leaders nudge doctoral researchers to consider non-academic careers beyond the university (Burford, 2018). In Danish universities, the institutional

response has been an increase of career building activities, workshops, and coaching for PhD researchers, often with a strong focus on transferrable skills and competences relevant for the job market. Further, we see a rise in the number of external partnership and co-financed PhD scholarships within Danish universities in collaboration with public organisations (museums, libraries, the Danish Defense), municipalities, private companies (publishing houses, drawing offices, digital platform developers), teacher training colleges (university colleges). Here the PhD project often links closely to an immediate local challenge or problem that needs solving and the research is carried out in close collaboration with the practitioners (and the users, customers) within the professional domain. Institutional responses to the changing policies include increased discussion around the genre and format of PhD dissertations, particularly within the social sciences and humanities (Skov, 2019). Following Oliver, this may be seen as a form of compromising, where the organisations attempt to balance the expectations from many different stakeholders – balancing on the knife’s edge.

The changes are also visible in quality assurance agendas, such as the mandatory courses in doctoral supervision for doctoral supervisors, which increasingly include modules on career guidance and talent development (Kobayashi, Godskesen, & Wichmann-Hansen, 2017). The complexity and many-sided expectations to the PhD and doctoral education have been reported to be confusing for doctoral students and supervisors, whose expectations and strategies are not always aligned with each other and with the wider institutional system framing doctoral education (Bengtson, 2017; Cornér et al., 2018). The tensions can also be seen on the micro-level in the ways doctoral supervision and pedagogy has a complex, layered, and not always internally coherent expression and outcome (Bengtson, 2016). A recent study (Bengtson & McAlpine, 2022, p. 35), though from a different national context, present similar findings about how supervisors are “*nested within and [that they] generally recognised the wider institutional policies and practices on department, faculty, and divisional levels*”, and how supervisors, as central actors within the leadership of researcher education, responded to the changing institutional framework differently. Some supervisors were “*neutral, others frustrated and demotivated, while others engaged more with leadership tasks, in this way, motivating changes within the department or institution more broadly*” (Bengtson & McAlpine, 2022). The study discloses the interrelations and mutual implications between policy, institutional, and educational levels, and how PhD education increasingly has been tied to and affected by strategic changes on institutional and national levels. It also reveals how doctoral education and the PhD becomes a kind of boundary object (Elmgren et al., 2016) holding the reins of many-sides interests and opportunities for agency not only from the institutions and researchers themselves but from the policy community, private sector, and other public institutions and organisations. Becoming a nexus for multiple forms of agency may hold a potential, or a future threat, for researcher education in the years to come.

Summary

In the previous sections, we have presented sectorial and institutional responses to the complexities of sometimes contradictory policy ideas. We have seen reception of policy initiatives span from reactive attempts of “bargaining” with limited success, leading to compliance in the case of the adjustment of English language university programs to a more proactive widening of this space of action in the case of the regionalisation initiative characterised by defiance and contestation. Finally, we have seen attempts of compromising and balancing stakeholder perspectives in the case of doctoral education.

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

As mentioned in the introduction, the aim of this paper was to analyse the past two decades of higher education policy development in Denmark with an eye for the complexities and nuances that such a development holds. We have therefore attempted to describe the policy development, not as a chronology, but as a policy genealogy, a history of policy ideas travelling through a system, weaving in and out of policies over time. By applying a meta-analytic approach, we have shown that policy making and its implications in institutional enactment and implementation do not follow a hierarchical causality going from policy making on the global level that impacts on national and institutional levels in turn. Rather, the global-local often seem to be mutually re-enforcing and connected domains. This approach helps us avoid being locked into atemporal and ahistorical analyses leaving out the processual and entangled character of both ‘global’ and ‘local’ (Brøgger, 2019, Robertson & Dale, 2008, Steiner-Khamsi, 2013). In the article, we demonstrated how this approach reveals central ideas being instrumental in the policy development, together giving us a view on the relation between state and institutions, the international, the national and regional, as highly malleable and in almost constant flux.

This flux might also help us understand the various and varying responses that the institutions enact in the face of new policy initiatives. As we have demonstrated with our three examples of sectorial and institutional responses to policy initiatives, the range of possible responses vary significantly, from a weak and uncoordinated response in the face of re-nationalisation, to a stronger sectorial response towards the re-regionalisation, to attempts of compromising and balancing the demands for internationalisation and mobility between sector and industry in relation to doctoral education.

It seems clear from the present analysis and discussion that the relationship between state and institutions in Denmark has been fundamentally redefined by the reforms of the past two decades and that the actors in the sector have been trying to find their way in this. Since the University Act in 2003, universities seem to have been struggling with coming to terms with their new position as self-governing institutions formally decoupled from the ministerial hierarchy and thus independent of direct state interference. The simultaneous implementation of government-initiated reforms and state-based policy instruments obviously made it difficult to manoeuvre the new position and to define and exploit the space for agency as a self-governing institution, in particular because the position did not necessarily lead to increased autonomy for the institutions.

Future trajectories of research may benefit from further exploring the universities' space for action and how the state-university relation plays out in light of recent tensions (and connections) between the national and the global.

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Notes

1. Danish students are eligible to public support for their further education and receive a publicly funded educational grant called State Education Support, more commonly known as ‘SU’.