

What Has Changed and What Remains?

Institutional Shifts in Nordic Higher Education in the 2000s

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The theme of this special issue, changes in higher education (HE) in the Nordics, might feel somewhat self-evident: by now, the adage from business, “the only constant is change”, seems to encapsulate the reality of higher education in the Nordics. As the movement from industrial welfare states to post-industrial competition states progresses in the Nordics, public universities are slowly but inexorably drawn into the sphere of national economic policy (Poutanen, 2022) as modern “factories” of knowledge production. Starting in the early 2000s, the salience of the knowledge economy paradigm meant that HE institutions (HEIs) were designated as one of the primary engines of economic growth and innovation. New stakeholders and new priorities have been added to universities’ social mission (Pinheiro et al., 2019).

While structures of academic self-governance remain, and in this sense Nordic universities have yet to match their Anglophone counterparts in terms of internal and administrative reforms, special emphasis has been placed on concentrating resources, leveraging competitive dynamics, and shifting from the traditional model based on academic, collegial governance towards a more professional and managerial orientation (Geschwind et al., 2019). As elsewhere, Nordic universities are being called upon to compete globally in rankings as well as for funding and prestige alike (Geschwind and Pinheiro, 2017). Academics have been more ambiguous about these new priorities. Collaboration, rather than competition, has served as a guiding principle of academic work. At the micro level, however, academic career models are now subject to increasing competitive pressures (Pietilä and Pinheiro, 2021). Nordic academics are increasingly subject to extraneous metrics, that reflect an idea of a

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Scandinavian Journal of
Public Administration
Vol. 27 No. 1 (2023),
p. 1 – 7
<https://doi.org/10.58235/sjpa.v27i1.11341>

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and School of Public
Administration,
e-ISSN: 2001-7413

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return on investment for public expenses in HE (Kivistö et al., 2019). While academics understand and accept accountability for their work, these instrumental pressures often clash with academics' notions of what the university is and for whom it exists (Hansen et al., 2019). For some, this has even led to a reimagining of the academic profession (Griffin, 2021), moving away from a dominant ethos of performativity (Berg et al., 2022; Kallio et al., 2021).

These changes have been preceded and followed by new legal requirements, government-led reforms and policy instruments, which have aligned Nordic HE systems with global and regional (European) best practices, whenever possible (Gornitzka and Maassen, 2011; Pekkola et al., 2022). The primary aim of such undertakings has been to foster efficiency, quality, accountability, and responsiveness to a multiplicity of stakeholders. These developments were underpinned by a hegemonic discourse, which argued that not changing would not only be irresponsible, but detrimental to the future of Nordic HEIs, their HE systems and the national economies to which they are tightly linked (Sørensen et al., 2019). So, change they must, and change they have.

However, while change in some areas has been both fast and acute, in some ways the core essence of Nordic HE remains the same. For example, although many Nordic public HEIs (e.g. in Finland) are no longer state-run institutions, their finances are still largely dependent on public funding allocations, determined by HE policy tools and goals, and informed by a New Public Management regime (Pinheiro et al., 2014). The change in the Nordics has followed what some have called the 'neoliberalization of HE' (Alajoutsijärvi et al., 2021), and others 'academic capitalism' (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004; see also Poutanen, 2023 in this issue), albeit with Nordic characteristics. This has injected a particular strain of market-oriented logic into the Nordic context, where market-logic is often reproduced through the proxy of the state (Gornitzka et al., 2014; Wedlin, 2008). One could argue that the adoption of market-based funding instruments, allows Nordic nation states to direct knowledge formation while retaining control over national competitiveness. This way the state neither risks ceding critical authority to uncontrolled market forces, nor leaves it in the hands of the HEIs or academics, as was the case in the recent past (cf. Nokkala and Bladh, 2014).

The effects of governmental reforms on HEIs vary nationally, depending on local translations of transnational policy trends, institutional contexts, and the willingness of academics to accept new policy ideas and incorporate them into their professional logic, academic subjectivities, and everyday practices (cf. Laterza et al., 2020, in the case of digital transformation). As such, discourses emphasising change in Nordic HE should also be tempered with a recognition of resilience within HEIs (Geschwind et al., 2022) and in the academic profession (Cavalli and Moscati, 2010), where change and continuity co-exist in complex ways. Change may be happening, but it is perhaps not as stark as is often first assumed.

This special issue owes its genesis to a workshop held in August 2021 at the Nordic Political Science Association's conference. The workshop was originally planned for 2020, but the COVID-19 outbreak first postponed it, and then forced the conference online. The opportunity to discuss the variety in Nordic HE

policy and compare and contrast experiences was welcomed by many of our colleagues. As campuses closed, academics looked for new avenues to network and to discuss both new and old concepts and ideas. The workshop served as an opportunity to intermingle across disciplinary lines and gain a new appreciation for the uniqueness and complexity inherent to Nordic HE systems and the academic profession.

In the Nordics, the legacy of HE has been closely connected with the welfare state. This means that researching public HEIs is not only an issue of public administration, but as both subjects and objects of HE policy, HEIs are becoming increasingly political entities. Surrounded by a rapidly changing and increasingly turbulent societal (political, economic, cultural, etc.) context, HEIs and the domestic HE systems in which they are embedded are undergoing substantial structural changes or reorganisations, with academics struggling to navigate among a range of subjectivities and multiple organisational tensions (Poutanen et al., 2021; Kallio et al., 2020).

As such, the workshop evolved into a living discussion amongst Nordic participants, which sparked the idea of continuing to work together in the form of a special issue of the *Scandinavian Journal of Public Administration*. Our primary aim was to expand on the workshop themes and, hopefully, to better capture, what, indeed, had changed, and what remains the same – by shedding light on the elements of change and continuity that can be found in Nordic HE policy (macro level), HEIs (meso), and academic work (micro).

In this special issue, four individual articles approach change and continuity in Nordic HE policy from different angles. Two of the articles explore ideational change in HE policies, outlining bold reforms of the national systems of Denmark and Finland. The studies make visible a longer view of continuity and change in domestic HE in the period from 2000 to 2020. The other two articles focus on the dynamic and complex interplay between institutional and academic ideals, as well as the importance associated with embracing complexity and reflexivity. These perspectives reflect the dynamics of collaboration and competition in academic practices, which may appear conflicting but often result in paradoxical tensions that, if handled properly or embraced, are likely to be negotiated or addressed in a constructive manner.

1. **Katja Brøgger, Lise Degn, and Søren Smedegaard Bengtson** describe how the ideals of institutional autonomy for universities in the Nordics have changed over the years. Their investigation shows that while powerful policy ideas have indeed shaped the development of Danish HE policy, they have not been received in a uniform manner throughout the system. Rather, idea implementation or adaptation was found to unfold around two parallel policy developments – the first revolves around the relationship between the state and universities, and the second on the interplay between national and global dimensions. As such, responses to top-down and centrally administered reforms were found to vary significantly as Danish universities play an active role in renegotiating their societal functions.

2. **Mikko Poutanen** argues that the shift in HE policy in Finland has been marked by new demands of competitiveness that have been placed on universities. In other words, as survival in the global competition of knowledge-based economies is considered paramount, Finnish HE policy guidance has sought to reform research via qualitative changes rather than by committing to increasing investments. These developments draw on public policy guidance leveraging a particular Finnish strain of academic capitalism. Finnish HE policy emphasizes a relatively competition-driven funding system through policy tools, such as performance-based funding. While all domestic political parties have assured their commitment to supporting the universities, the Finnish system also features a relatively high susceptibility to political control, which can be seen as a challenge to substantive academic autonomy. Indeed, research, development and innovation policy may fall victim to changes in political fortunes, resulting in cutbacks in university funding.
3. **Rómulo Pinheiro** and **Kirsi Pulkkinen** deploy paradox theory to reconceptualize the relationship between competition and co-operation in Nordic HE. Building on data from Norway and Finland, their analysis not only shows that an interplay of competition and co-operation is strongly present in the form of multiple contradictory tensions but also that these tensions push further developments in the academic profession and the HE systems in which they are embedded. Collaboration and competition are not two conflicting binaries – rather, they are integrated dynamics of the changing nature of the academic profession, which may influence and feed off one another.
4. **Anna Jonsson**, **Eugenia Perez Vico**, and **Diamanto Politis** analyse collaboration between academia and society – a key priority for many HEIs in Sweden. Societal collaboration, too, has been assumed under the rubric of innovation and competitiveness, driven as a matter of public policy, and reflected in policy documents. However, their study shows that “imposing” collaboration (top-down approach) tends to work poorly, and such strategic guidance often falls short in the face of scepticism. The result is a mismatch between strategic goals and everyday work – a disconnect between theory and practice. The authors use their own auto-ethnographic experiences to explain how organising efforts for collaboration require the integral alignment of strategy and practice to facilitate the bottom-up adoption of collaborative praxis.

Moving forward, we urge colleagues across the Nordic countries and beyond to continue shedding light on the different mechanisms underpinning change and continuity in contemporary Nordic HE systems, including the institutional and academic settings in which teaching, research, innovation, and engagement tasks unfold in dynamic and sometimes contradictory ways. We also welcome the return of the political dimension into analyses on how HEIs are governed externally – typically by their national ministries of education – and internally by new operational logics or even new administrative systems. Our hope is that this

special issue will stimulate many more discussions around this important topic in the years to come, not only for students of HE systems but also scholars of public administration and public policy more generally.

Acknowledgements

The guest editors would like to express our sincere thanks to the participants of the panel on Nordic HE held at the 2021 Nordic Political Science Congress (NOPSA). That panel led to the development of this Special Issue. We also extend our thanks to the dozen or so anonymous peers who provided critical input at different stages of the publication process. Finally, we are grateful to Professor Vicki Johansson, Chief Journal Editor, and her team for their valuable editorial support. Any remaining errors are the responsibility of the authors and/or guest editors.

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