



# ***University Autonomy and Organizational Change Dynamics***

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## **Abstract**

In this paper university autonomy is discussed from four different analytical perspectives. First, a discussion is presented of autonomy as conceptualized in the academic literature covering public sector governance in general. Second, the concept of autonomy is deconstructed through discussing its underlying assumptions and by examining the relationship between state authorities and universities. In so doing the paper proposes an institutional approach to the study of autonomy. Third, the way in which autonomy affects organizational design according to centralization, formalization, standardization, legitimization and flexibility is addressed. Fourth, relating to our interpretation of the living autonomy we will discuss how reforms that are aimed at enhancing university autonomy have affected the internal governance structure. The empirical setting consists of a study on flagship universities in eight continental European countries. First findings show tensions as a consequence of the ways in which enhanced institutional autonomy is interpreted, operationalized and used within flagship universities. These tensions are manifested by the nature of the interactions between the traditional academic domain and the emerging executive structure inside these institutions.

## **Key words**

Autonomy – Educational Policy – Institutionalism – New Public Management – Organizational Design – Universities

## Introduction

The interest in and debates on university autonomy are as old as the institution itself. This reflects the essential issue of finding an effective and mutually acceptable balance between society's need to have a sufficient level of control over the university versus the university's need for an appropriate level of independence in handling its own affairs. Hence this debate relates to core questions of the discretion of public sector organizations, that is, the extent to which these organizations can decide themselves about matters they consider important (Verhoest et al. 2004: 18–19, Roness et al. 2008).

University autonomy is a continuous issue in higher education policy debates because an ideal situation, in the sense of a stable, perfect level of institutional autonomy, does not exist. The perception of what constitutes to be an appropriate level of institutional autonomy reflects the *Zeitgeist*, that is, the dominant underlying vision with respect to the preferable model of governing the university as a core social institution (Olsen 2007). This is also currently the case. Once again what is considered to be the appropriate level of autonomy is an important issue in the policy debates on university governance, organization, and funding. In Europe this has come to the fore in national higher education reform initiatives, as well as in the Commission's modernization agendas for higher education, all showing a strong belief in the relationship between the level of institutional autonomy and the socio-economic relevance of the university's primary processes in education and research. Concomitantly, over the last few decades in all European countries the governance relationship between the state and the university has been modified implying adaptations in the formal level of institutional autonomy.

Academic studies on university autonomy have focused almost exclusively on changes in the formal governance relationship between state authorities and universities, and the effects of these changes on the formal room to manoeuvre of universities. How these changes have been interpreted within universities and how these interpretations have affected the internal operations, decision making practices, organizational structures, and funding realities in universities has hardly received any attention in the academic literature.

Starting from these considerations this paper discusses university autonomy from four perspectives. First, it revisits the concept of autonomy as conceptualized in the academic literature covering public sector governance in general; second it discusses different rationales underlying reforms for enhancing university autonomy; third it presents assumptions about how autonomy reforms relate to changes within universities, and based on these a conceptualization of "the living autonomy", fourth it offers some empirical

illustrations, taken from a research project called “Flagship”, of how intra-university organizational and governance changes result from the enhanced autonomy of European flagship universities in eight smaller West-European countries. The starting point of this research project is that organizational and governance changes within European flagship universities are triggered by recent reforms enhancing institutional autonomy, and that these changes can be spotted at multiple levels of analysis.

The two main research questions addressed in the Flagship project are: first, what are the organized 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? Second: what are the main autonomy-related factors that over the last ten years have affected these organized university settings and institutional characteristics?

## **Autonomy revisited**

### **Studies on university autonomy**

University autonomy reforms have been studied rather intensively. Recently the European University Association (EUA) has, for example, “scored” the formal autonomy status of universities along various autonomy dimensions (Estermann and Nokkala 2009; Estermann et al. 2011). The results suggest that European universities may score high on financial autonomy, while organizational autonomy remains at lower levels. Another study, mandated by the European Commission to a consortium led by the Dutch Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS) examined the level of formal institutional autonomy, its link with performance, and the degree of compliance with the EU modernization agenda. As in the EUA study, the findings suggest a great variety in the level of formal institutional autonomy across European university systems (de Boer et al. 2010; Jongbloed et al. 2010).

These and other studies on university autonomy offer a broad perspective when it comes to the number of European countries included and the formal frameworks within which institutional autonomy can be examined. However, they do not provide an empirically based insight into the effects of changes in the formal institutional autonomy inside the universities.

A more conceptually oriented contribution to the discussion on formal university autonomy is provided by Enders et al. (2013). These authors use university autonomy in the Netherlands as an empirical case for analyzing the tensions between formal and “real” autonomy. For them “real” autonomy

refers to the room to manoeuvre universities have when one analyses limits imposed on the formal institutional autonomy by the state's control focus and demand for accountability. The authors "echo" the academic literature on university autonomy from the 1980's (see e.g. Van Vught 1989), while adding a thorough discussion on the nature of the New Public Management (NPM) reforms in Europe since the early 1990s to the understanding of the nature of recent changes with respect to the level of formal university autonomy.

As indicated, the studies on the formal relationship state - universities have not been followed by a comparable scholarly focus on what in this paper is referred to as "the living autonomy", i.e. the way in which changes in the formal governance relationship between state authorities and universities are perceived, interpreted, operationalized and used inside the institutions. This implies an understanding of the practices of institutional autonomy at the "working floor", i.e. 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.

The studies mentioned above have highlighted the strong relation between changes in the overall regulatory framework and the level of formal university autonomy. In addition, a number of scholars have argued that tensions are emerging between government and universities when changes in the overall regulatory framework aimed at enhancing institutional autonomy are combined with new demands for institutional accountability (Christensen 2011; Enders et al. 2013). The aim of this paper is not to repeat these arguments, and identify e.g. best practices, construct benchmarks, or measure levels of formal university autonomy. Instead we want to introduce a conceptual and methodological framework for analyzing how inside universities institutional autonomy is interpreted and practiced. In this way we want to contribute to the understanding of the living autonomy in specific universities, i.e. flagship universities. In the underlying research project a flagship university is defined as a comprehensive, research intensive university, located in a major urban area. In general it is among the oldest and largest higher education institutions of its country. This focus on "flagships" has implications for the nature of institutional autonomy under scrutiny here, since these kind of universities can be expected to be given more leeway than others because of their scientific leading role at the national level.

For analyzing the “living autonomy” it is necessary to start with a discussion of the concept of autonomy as conceptualized in the academic literature covering public sector governance in general. This unpacking, as presented in the next section, will allow us to relate our conceptualization of the living autonomy to recent interpretations of autonomy in the general social science literature.

## **Unpacking autonomy**

Broadening the scope of analysis, the organizational autonomy of public sector agencies can be linked to different types of steering (or state) models, hence to diverse rationales for narrowing down the scope of hierarchical subordination (Olsen 1988). The concept of “steering models” refers to the modes governments use to control and affect societal sectors, such as higher education. Steering models point to differences in two underlying sets of rules, that is, interaction rules and context rules. These rules determine the relationships between state and society in a policy subsystem, with each steering model epitomizing the nature of state encroachment on different aspects of society. Interaction rules are rules that structure the interaction behavior of actors in a public sector, while context rules refer to the way the context in which the interaction takes place is regulated (Gornitzka and Maassen 2000).

First, within a centralized steering model, which structures hierarchical steering relationships with public organizations, autonomy may be granted simply because the state cannot do everything. The rationale underlying this model is linked to bounded rationality arguments and considers that a centralizing state still has to delegate some tasks in order to function properly. This implies that organizational autonomy especially with respect to specific “technical” matters is delegated. Second, in what has been referred to as a corporate-pluralist steering model, negotiations take place constantly between (networks of) interest groups, the outcomes of which are largely dependent on the distribution of power. Therefore, the balance between agency autonomy and state control is subject to continuous compromises between stronger and weaker parts of the state, the (broader) public administration, and groups of actors. This can be referred to as “negotiated autonomy”. Third, an institutional steering model calls for societal norms and values, according to which specific organizations, such as universities, are deemed to be autonomous because of their unique role and history in society. Hence, higher learning and research are understood to be the domain of academic, that is, professional, organizations functioning somewhat independently from the state. Fourth, a supermarket steering model provides conditions for market and competition where public organizations can operate as service providers.

Autonomy is here a pre-requisite for public organizations to be able to position themselves in a competitive environment. This is clearly the underlying doctrine of the dominant public sector reform trend of the 1990s, and 2000s, referred to under the banner of “New Public Management” (Pollitt 2003). Here, autonomy is both a feature of a functioning organization and a basic element of the present transformation of fragmented public organizations into integrated strategic organizational actors. The four rationales underlying the four state models are presented as ideal types, while in reality all four types may be present in hybrid forms in one single national context (Gornitzka and Maassen 2000).

When looking at the rationale for reforms strengthening public organization autonomy, some built-in assumptions can be detected that represent a mixture of the centralized and supermarket steering models’ rationales for organizational autonomy. The first is that such reforms can be implemented only if more administrative competencies (conceived of as less external input control on financial and human resources matters) are devolved by government to public sector organizations, while similarly these more autonomous organizations have to undergo external result control, financial incentives and competition. Enhancement of institutional autonomy for public sectors organizations is “compensated” by an increase in ex post regulations and demands for accountability (Roness et al. 2008). Hence, while input control is granted to the public organization, output control is strictly in the hands of government or some other evaluation agencies (Verhoest et al. 2004), either through some hierarchical supervisory system of accountability or through making autonomized agencies accountable through legal contract arrangements (Romzek and Dubnick 1987).

The second assumption relates to the expectation that autonomy is beneficial, for it will bring specialization and the consequent superior performance, measured in terms of economy, efficiency and effectiveness. Thus, by acquiring more autonomy, public sector organizations are expected to become able to define their own priorities, to position themselves strategically, and to find their appropriate “market” niche.

These assumptions are based on the rational choice approach and principal-agency theory, whereby institutional leadership (the agent) is considered to act in a self-interested way and accordingly requires control mechanisms and incentives from the government (the principal). The correlation with autonomy and differentiation is based on the strategic argument that the more room to manoeuvre an organization is acquiring, the more the organization will specialize in order to distinguish itself from its competitors and achieve competitive advantage (Porter 1980).



## **Institutionalized autonomy and the special status of the university**

We take the stance that there are multiple external relationships that affect the autonomy of universities. Autonomy is not only a question of delegating decision making competencies along the hierarchical line of command between the responsible Ministry and subordinate university. Nor is it merely a question of substituting state control over university activities with market dependencies. A more elementary starting-point is that the nature of autonomy is closely related to the role universities play in society. The university enjoys a special status, because of its tradition, history and the values it represents in society (Kezar and Eckel 2004, Olsen and Maassen 2007).

Moreover, the special status of the university has to be linked to accountability. The relevance of accountability has grown parallel to the importance of institutional autonomy in the modern public sector organization interpretation of the concept (Bladh 2007, Enders et al. 2013, Neave 2001). Tensions emerge in this respect, as universities have unclear goals to assess: the university's core technology - production and dissemination of knowledge - is unclear and ambiguous, for it is hard to prescribe it, to predict the outcomes, and to link input to output (Cohen and March 1974, Musselin 2006, Olsen 2007: 27, Whitley 2008). Furthermore, accountability relationships not only encompass the managerial or contractually based means of output control, but a "pact" (or social contract) that defines the mutual expectations and relations between universities, government and society (Gornitzka et al. 2007, Maassen 2014). University relevance in society has increased, as mass higher education has become a reality, costs have risen incessantly, and the university's role in stimulating innovation and economic growth has been emphasized increasingly in national policies. Consequently it can be regarded as natural that accountability to several constituencies has become more and more relevant. This implies that different stakeholders are involved, who may have different and competing ideas on how universities should be organized and on who should be in charge of their functioning. Further it portends that autonomy reforms address the complex balance between independence and control, and that universities are themselves in search for a (new) legitimate place within the social order (Gornitzka et al. 2007, Olsen and Maassen 2007). The question to be raised in this regard is how much the university's institutional identity has been challenged and what this means for its role and function in society.

Finally, autonomy and accountability are relational - they concern how universities relate to their environment, to state authorities, their "constituencies" and the wider society. Just as autonomy is multimodal,

accountability relationships take several shapes: bureaucratic, legal, political or professional. Autonomy and accountability of universities then concern the means by which universities and those who work within them manage diverse expectations generated within and outside the organization, as is the case with other public sector organizations (Romzek and Dubnick 1987: 228, Kraatz and Block 2008).

To address the complexities underlying the concept of autonomy, we propose a broader scope for analysis and we discuss hereafter an institutional approach to university autonomy (Olsen 2009). An institutional approach conceives of institutions as playing a partly autonomous role as well as acting independently, that is beyond environmental determination and strategic choice. In the broader perspective on political and social order university legitimacy is shaped by connections and interdependencies with other actors and institutions (Gornitzka et al. 2007, Olsen 2009). This implies that the autonomy of the university is also established, maintained and molded over time, and it is anchored in its own sphere that is carried by the institution itself and recognized by outside constituents, implying that autonomy is institutionalized. Indeed universities are institutionalized organizations, that is, they are infused with values beyond the technical requirements of their task (Selznick 1957). Their resilience and adaptability to external influence have to be analysed against their distinctive structures, routines and identity (Fumasoli and Stensaker 2013).

## **Living autonomy: an institutional analysis of organizational change in universities**

If autonomy is institutionalized does that imply that it is indifferent to change? An institutional perspective will not expect to see changes within universities to be dictated by external reforms. The scope for external design is limited and only to be expected to play a major unfettered role under special circumstances with performance crises or external emergencies. From an institutional perspective the impact of external factors (both in the form of explicit reforms and expectations from larger sets of environmental actors) is determined first and foremost by processes *within* the university and is shaped by the internal structures, institutionally defined expectations, ideas and practices. An important remaining question from an institutional perspective is how internal processes handle external expectations and pressures. Hence a study of university autonomy reform cannot stop at the gates of the university, or at its central leadership and governance bodies and actors, but has to go beyond them by examining the “living autonomy”, that is, how these reforms are interpreted, translated, buffered, channeled and used internally. Only such

an examination which goes beyond formal autonomy relationships will allow for an understanding of the real discretion of universities.

## **Reforms and university change**

A core part of university autonomy reforms is aimed at affecting the university's organization and governance structures. In order to examine change in the university's organizational and governance design, there are different variables to be considered. In this paper we have identified a number of variables that are considered of major relevance for examining university change: centralization, formalization, standardization, legitimization, and flexibility.

*Centralization* concerns the dispersion of authority to make decisions affecting the organization. There are factors influencing centralization related to the following questions: Where in the university's governance structure does the actual decision-making take place? How are rules for decision-making promulgated, which may limit the discretion of subordinates? What is the nature of control systems (Pugh et al. 1963)? Other questions to be addressed are: Who controls resources (human, financial, material, intangible) and who controls the workflow?

Recent reforms have been aimed at strengthening the formal authority of university leadership. But they have also introduced systems of accountability for monitoring the output. Thus, a subtle balance between autonomy and the many strings of accountability systems is in place. This we can expect will affect the organizational structure as (formal) decision-making is increasingly granted to university leadership (higher degree of centralization), while at the same time external evaluation and accountability processes reduce the practical room to manoeuvre for the institutional leadership (lower degree of centralization). Hence, a tension between centralizing and de-centralizing is entailed in university autonomy reforms.

*Formalization* refers to the degree according to which communications and procedures are written and filed. It can relate to statements of procedures, rules, and roles, and to operations of procedures dealing with processes of decision-making and the delivery of instructions as well as of information. It is important also to determine the source of formalization, that is, along a continuum between legal requirements and spontaneous individual ideas. Increasing autonomy (and accountability) should augment formalization, in the sense that strengthened managerialism resulting from increased autonomy calls for formalization of internal communications and procedures, particularly when intervening in a professional organization, such as the

university. Moreover, the growing accountability addressing performance in terms of results measurement requires accrued reporting and quantification to external constituencies. It is from these requirements that the call for a professional administration emerges. Within the university this implies a radical shift in a relatively short period (Maassen 2003: 46–47) from administration as “the least noted subculture of the academic enterprise” (Clark 1983: 89) to the need for “a strengthened administrative core as a mandatory feature of a heightened capability to confront the root imbalance of modern universities” (ibid.: 138).

*Standardization* refers to the extent to which procedures for decision-making, information provision, and implementation become regularly occurring events, which are legitimized by the organization. Increased standardization means that there are rules that cover all circumstances and that apply invariably, while standardization of roles implies that role definitions and required qualifications for office, titles, symbols, status and rewards become de-personalized, independent of the personal features of the persons who are in office.

Clearly standardization and formalization are correlated, as standardized procedures and roles need, at least to some extent, to be formalized in order for the organization to endorse them thoroughly. The tension entailed here may concern different functions: in university personnel policies, for instance, professors are used to apply their own (collegial) system in order to recruit and promote their peers. This is based on scientific and disciplinary criteria that traditionally shape the overall assessment of candidates. More recently, the increasing role of the institutional leadership and central administration, as well as the formalization and standardization of procedures with regard at least to senior academics, have put under pressure practices that before have been carried out exclusively by professors, that is, in their position as the traditional university professionals (Fumasoli 2013).

*Legitimization* has to do with the insight from institutional theory that the outcomes of autonomy reforms are not only the result of the aggregate of actions of individual actors, but also of collective rules, norms and beliefs that structure actions (Clemens and Cook 1999). New practices in universities not only emerge and are spread inside the institution as a result of reform enhanced structural changes and formalized management requirements, but also through the development within the university’s academic community of collective regulatory rules, norms and beliefs (Meyer and Rowan 1977, Scott 2001). In essence, legitimization from an institutional perspective refers to the assumption that for organisations to change as a result of government initiatives “a *normative* match is necessary, that is, congruence between the

values and beliefs underlying a proposed programme or policy and the identity and traditions of the organisation” (Gornitzka 1999: 10). The higher the level of normative match between a reform aimed at university change and the dominant collective academic regulatory rules, norms and beliefs, the likelier it is that the new practice will be accepted and institutionalized.

*Flexibility* refers to the ease with which organizational and governance structures and processes can adapt to changing circumstances, and new expectations, demands and requirements. Looking at the design of these, flexibility concerns informal and adaptable structures and processes (Huber and McDaniel 1986: 583), which can be observed in three aspects: the amount, the speed, and the acceleration of change and adaptability. An additional aspect of flexibility is the organization’s receptivity to influences stemming from its environment and its readiness and ability to absorb them (Pugh et al. 1963: 307). Whitley (2012) has conceptualized flexibility as:

[t]he openness of the scientific community, employers, funding agencies and other authoritative groups and organisations to novel and unusual ways of framing problems, developing new, especially cross disciplinary, ways of dealing with them and interpreting evidence.

(Whitley 2012: 6)

This is directly related to the university setting and may support the conception of universities as open systems where academic activities are carried out through multiple connections and dimensions within, across, and outside the academic organization. In this way, a more comprehensive vision of organizational change and its (unanticipated) outcomes can be forged.

It can be argued that a high level of flexibility is directly proportional to a low level of centralization, formalization and standardization. The specific combination of the latter three dimensions affects differently the extent of flexibility and is a matter for empirical testing.

In examining the effects of these variables on university change, it is important to control for contextual variables, such as size, disciplinary profile, geographical location, and history. A core argument deriving from the institutional perspective assumes that these contextual variables will constitute major path dependencies and culturally based variables that will affect how universities interpret and use autonomy reforms internally. Since this paper is focused on flagship universities, we contend that several of these variables are maintained uniformly throughout the sample. Flagship universities in our study share some common characteristics: they are all comprehensive, old and traditional institutions, they are public, they are large

(at least relatively within their own national higher education system), and they are all located in major urban areas of their country. Conversely, they (may) display variety in their missions and in their resources, such as students or finances.

## **Research design and methodology**

In the research project underlying this paper we are focusing on organizational and governance changes within European flagship universities that are a consequence of recent reforms aimed at enhancing formal university autonomy. At central organizational and intra-organizational levels, the project examines change in organizational and governance design; at organizational and system level, the relationship between the university and its environment is analysed.

In order to comprehend the multiple facets of organizational change we have constructed our research design by means of a multiple embedded case study (Yin 2009), entailing several cases at several levels of analysis. The rationale for our choice has been that the majority of European studies on university autonomy has been either comprehensive or descriptive, strongly focused on the larger EU member states, or individual country case studies. Taking a different stance we have decided to investigate comparatively 'institutional autonomy' in universities in small(er) continental countries that can be argued to have implemented rather far-reaching university autonomy reforms, that is, 8 countries in three regional clusters: the Nordic region (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden); the Low Countries, (Belgium and the Netherlands); and Austria and Switzerland. This set includes two countries outside the EU (Norway and Switzerland).

Eleven universities have been selected: Oslo and Bergen for Norway; Stockholm and Gothenburg for Sweden; Copenhagen and Aarhus for Denmark; Helsinki for Finland; KU Leuven for Belgium, Amsterdam for the Netherlands; Zurich for Switzerland, and Vienna for Austria. We have limited our sample to flagship universities, in order to get a better understanding of organizational and governance change in leading academic institutions.

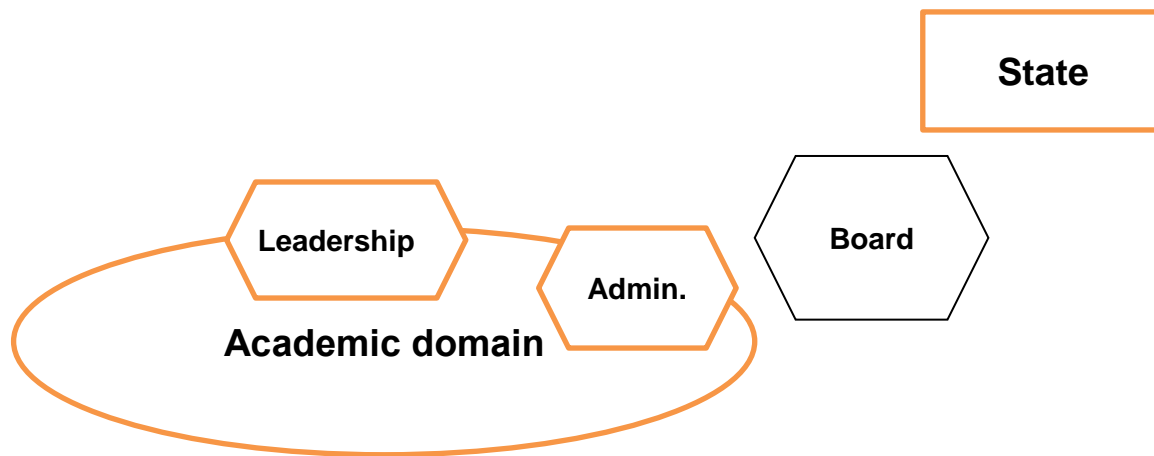
For the institutional case studies we have selected four disciplinary fields, that is, psychology, public health, teacher education, and chemistry. With respect to each of these fields three departments have been selected in our sample of universities. In each of these departments interviews are undertaken, relevant data has been collected and analysed, as well as relevant departmental documents. The main focus in this has been on the areas of personnel policies

and research management. Inside each of these departments the following actors are selected for interviews: head of department, departmental head of administration, and 3 to 5 leading professors. These departmental level case studies are followed up by faculty level and central institutional level case studies in the included flagship universities.

## **“Living autonomy” and the university**

In recent reforms institutional autonomy has been argued to be a necessary condition for universities to become excellent. Different dimensions are alluded to: performance, responsiveness to markets and to various stakeholders, strategic positioning through differentiation. This represents a redefinition of university autonomy, which matches the rationale of general public sector reforms, and favours the “organizational dimension” in contrast to the ‘academic dimension(s)’. Traditionally university autonomy was linked to academic freedom and academic self-government. The first concerns the 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). The latter has to do with control of academics in matters concerning students, staff, standards and degrees, curricula, and research management (Ashby 1966: 323). Since the 1990s institutional autonomy has gradually been restated as a series of operational conditions and functions beyond its ethical and philosophical axiom. This has been done by redefining the relation between autonomy and accountability (Neave 2001). One of the consequences of recent university autonomy reforms based on the redefinition of autonomy seems to be the development of an executive structure within the university and its gradual separation from the traditional academic domain of the university.

Traditionally the main actors and bodies of the governance structure of continental European universities were located inside its academic domain (see figure 1). This governance structure was based on academic self-governance, with in many ways symbolic leadership of selected professors who acted for a limited period of time in rector, dean or department head positions as *primus inter pares*. This symbolic leadership was assisted by an administrative support structure that also provided services to the senior academic staff. The support structure consisted mainly of secretaries and technical support staff, while it also was responsible for basic administrative tasks, such as financial administration, maintenance, and personnel policies. In general this administrative support structure and academic leadership were regarded as a “necessary evil” (Clark 1983; Maassen 2003).



**Basic characteristics:**

- Leadership by professors/senior academic staff (*'primus inter pares'*)
- Administration subservient to senior academic staff
- Board with double role (representing interests of government and higher education)
- 'Management' non-existent

Figure 1: Traditional governance structure in European universities

In many cases the university was linked to society through a “board” consisting of external members who were appointed by the responsible Ministry. This board had in practice a double role, that is, controlling whether the operations and decisions of the university’s own governance structure were legally and politically acceptable, and representing the university’s interests towards the responsible Ministry (de Boer 2003: 16–18). In essence this governance structure existed from the early 19th century to the end of the 1960s.

The changes that resulted of the democratization of the university governance structure in the 1960s and 1970s (de Boer 2003; de Boer and Stensaker 2007) took place in first instance within the academic domain. But the NPM inspired reforms introduced in the late 1980s and 1990s changed the traditional university governance structure rather fundamentally. One of the consequences of these reforms as also emerging from the first findings of the Flagship project is the introduction of an executive structure separated from the academic domain that has become more and more hierarchical in its organization and functioning (see figure 2).

Leadership functions and the administrative support structures have to a large extent been moved out of the academic domain into the executive structure. In



addition, a new “management” function has been created inside the executive structure. The differences between these functions are in practice not always

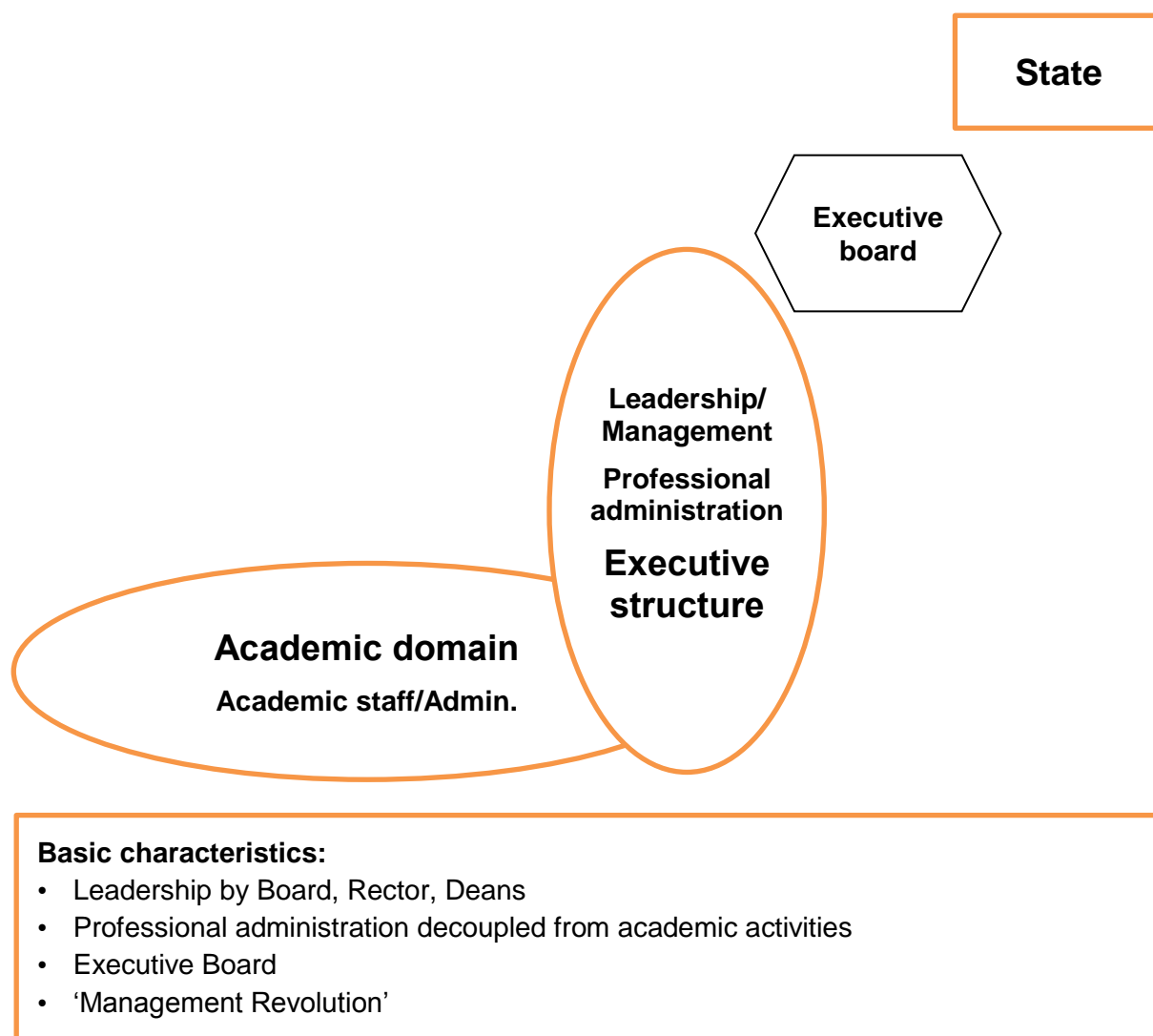


Figure 2: NPM inspired governance structure in European universities

easy to identify, but following Gallagher (2001: 1), Reed et al. (2002), and Maassen (2003), it can be argued that institutional leadership is mainly about strategic direction giving and setting, management is about outcomes achievement and the monitoring of organizational effectiveness and efficiency in the distribution of resources, and administration is about the implementation of procedures. These leadership, administrative, and management functions are expected to be further professionalised in order for the university to be able to profit optimally from the enhanced organizational autonomy. A striking feature of this new university governance structure is that the enhanced formal institutional autonomy has in essence been integrated only into the executive structure. This implies that the organizational executive structure has interpreted and incorporated the increased autonomy into existing and new bodies, as well as into procedures

and regulations, which are located in or operated by the executive structure. In this new structure the leadership, management and administrative functions are to a large extent externally oriented towards the sectorally relevant political actors and bureaucratic agencies in the university's environment, rather than towards the university's academic domain. The latter is a consequence of the crucial importance of the accountability demands that have accompanied the enhanced formal institutional autonomy.

The traditional substantive and procedural authority of the university professoriate with respect to primary activities in the academic domain seems to have been replaced by a complex governance structure in which bodies and actors in the executive structure now hold the formal responsibilities with respect to core administrative *and* academic matters. At the same time, in most research-intensive universities the governance and administration of the (content of) the primary activities of education and research are still dominated by senior academics, with a support structure in the form of specialized education and research administrators, that is located at the lowest organizational level (e.g. departments), and in general closely linked to the involved academic staff.

How is enhanced formal institutional autonomy interpreted and used by the university's executive structure in the changes introduced in the governance structure and organizational design of the institution? In addressing this question we will use the variables introduced above.

### Centralization

It has been argued in the higher education literature that the university was traditionally organised in a rather flat, horizontal way, with decision-making structures that were collegially instead of hierarchically organised, and academically instead of procedurally oriented (Clark 1983). However, this view of academic government has been nuanced through later studies, showing that collective decision-making in the university "became regularized as procedures and eventually structures" (Kogan 1999: 264). In addition, the collegial nature of decision-making did not include any other academic members than full professors. Nonetheless, the flat professorial decision-making structure, together with the rather subservient position of the administration to the professoriate, and the leadership principle of *primus inter pares*, did characterise the university's governance structures in most of its post-1800 history. Clearly, university autonomy has traditionally not been identified with strong and professional leadership, but instead with academic self-governance.

As indicated above, the current link between autonomy and leadership is based on a new definition of and expectations with respect to university autonomy. This development has regularly been referred to as representing a “management revolution in higher education” (Rourke and Brooks 1966; Keller 1983; Amaral et al. 2003), indicating that the current focus on “strong leadership” is not part of a “natural” development of the university as an institution, but instead forms a dramatic break with the traditions and characteristics typical for the university as an institution. The consequences of this “management revolution” can be seen through the efforts of university leaders and state authorities to centralize the authority within the university. This implies a move from co-determination through collective bodies dominated by the professoriate to executive decision-making by delegated individuals, in most cases appointed leaders and managers, and an executive institutional board. This centralization tendency in university governance structures seems in essence the consequence of deliberate design, either by the system level policy makers, or by the new institutional leadership and its professional administrative support structure.

### Formalization

Traditionally, most of the academic decisions inside universities were made through personal judgements and preferences of the professoriate, with the administrative support structure assisting the professors in implementing the decisions. Obviously this had to be done within a national regulatory framework, and gradually also through intra-university procedures and structures, but in essence in core academic matters it was the professor who decided and the administrator or secretary who had to make sure that this decision could be implemented. For the professoriate the individual room to manoeuvre was large, and the procedural/regulatory conditions limited.

Recent reforms have led to a formalization of the intra-university decision-making procedures and reporting requirements. This is not necessarily the result of the enhancement of institutional autonomy per se, but rather of the accountability and reporting demands that have accompanied this enhancement. In order to be able to be accountable and report to external agencies and actors the university leadership has formalized the internal procedures, and evaluation and reporting requirements in areas such as research output, quality of education, financial administration, international cooperation, etc.

## Standardization

The role of the administration and administrative procedures were traditionally relatively open in the university. In general problems and requirements were handled in a rather ad-hoc way, without the need to develop and institutionalize standardized procedures for the university as a whole. University autonomy reforms have implied a professionalization of administrative roles and organization. In practice by “professionalization” we mean that the administrative support structure has undergone far-reaching changes, which have been described in depth by Gornitzka et al. (1998, 2004). One trend has been that traditional support functions, such as secretaries and technicians, have been replaced by professional administrative functions. Another development is that administrative tasks and roles have become more standardized throughout the university. As a consequence, requirements for formal qualifications have increased for staff of administrative units, while administrative staff also has become more specialized. Specialization implies that each staff member in an administrative unit gets a clearly defined task, and is therefore not assumed to get involved in administrative activities or roles that fall outside his/her specialized task.

Both formalization and standardization of university governance structures and administrative roles, procedures and functions have been regarded by state authorities and institutional leadership to be an important element in the enhanced autonomy process of universities. The argument is that universities have become massive, complex organizations that can only be led effectively by “professionals”. While this argument may sound convincing, it does not necessarily reflect the specific institutional nature of the university. This can be illustrated by a quote from one of the interviewees in the Flagship project which reflects the “standard” opinion of university professors involved: “The administrative support structure in my university has become more professional, but at the same time less effective”.

The “mismatch” referred to in this quote has to do with the nature of the structural changes implemented in the university, and basic institutional characteristics of the university. The primary activities in the academic domain of universities have become more complex and varied, as a consequence of, for example, diversifying student demands and expectations, new types of study programmes (e.g. joint degree programmes), new interfaculty cooperation units and projects, a growth in the number of international and EU-funded research projects, a more diversified external research funding context, and the emergence of the need to focus on innovation in academic activities. At the same time, the administrative support structure has become more standardized, formalized and routinized, with the administrators having

become more specialized. Preliminary findings from the underlying research project suggest that this growing mismatch between the diversification of the activities in the academic domain and the standardization of the administrative support functions and roles, coupled with the growing hierarchy of university leadership and management functions in the executive structure has become one of the core areas of contestation in the debates about the room to manoeuvre, or “living autonomy”, of the university.

University reforms have not only raised questions concerning functional performance, effectiveness, efficiency and improvement, but also foundational questions about the values, norms, interests, and power underlying the university system. This suggests competing values, norms, and interests. Such situations tend to activate a variety of issues to which there rarely are technically superior, durable and agreed-upon solutions. Contestation, coalition-building and conflict resolution, therefore, are likely to be central aspects of reforms (Gornitzka et al. 2007: 186–187).

The language of university reform has primarily been functional. For example, in national and supranational university policy debates a core assumption has been that there is an agreed-upon agenda for reform. It has also been commonplace to argue that it is undisputable how things work and how they could be made to work better. However, university dynamics are rarely driven by stable, consistent and agreed-upon preference functions. Attempts to create an intra-university agreement with respect to the structural and cultural changes to be achieved on a limited number of operational reform objectives have rarely succeeded. Involved actors have often been pursuing many and conflicting reform objectives or they have been acting according to competing norms.

## Legitimization

Getting a better understanding of the complex university change dynamics resulting from the enhancement of autonomy requires not only an in-depth analysis of the structural changes universities have undergone, but also a thorough examination of core institutional variables. Why have far-reaching structural changes and reforms less impact than might be expected? What role do organizational cultures and values play in university change dynamics? Can differences in change dynamics between universities be explained through cultural conditions?

While university leadership has received more formal power and authority through recent reforms, leading to processes of centralization, formalization and standardization in the organizational design of universities, these changes

do not mean that the leadership has gotten more control over the academic content and focus of the university's primary processes; the outcomes of these processes are in essence still impossible to predict (Maddox 1964; Olsen 2007: 27).

An institutional approach emphasizes the robustness and resilience of the university against changing environments and deliberate reform efforts (March and Olsen 1989). Making sense of university dynamics requires that we take into account the density and types of institutionalized rules and practices in which the university is embedded, as well as the origins, histories and traditions of the university. Properties of such institutional configurations and traditions are likely to influence the degree to which the university will be able to deal efficiently with contradictory demands and expectations in university reforms. In addition, these configurations and traditions provide insight into the way in which intra-university reform processes look for and require or fail to require the necessary legitimization among the university's academic community. Given the impossibility to predict the outcomes of academic activities, and the accompanying continuous academic control over the content (the "what") of the university's primary processes, university leadership can acquire the necessary legitimization for its internal structural reforms and its strategic actions, as long as the reforms do not challenge the academic control over the content of the primary processes, and the strategic action are embedded in the university's institutionalized rules and practices, as well as its configurations and traditions.

### Flexibility

An important element in recent university developments in the eight European countries included in the Flagship project is the focus on system diversity. Traditionally continental European university systems have been characterised by equality, unity and homogeneity (Goedegebuure et al. 1994). As indicated above, one of the core assumptions underlying recent governmental university reforms is that autonomous universities with professional leadership will identify the best fitting 'niche' for the university, developing an appropriate university profile, and initiate and implement strategic actions aimed at steering the university in line with its profile. The preliminary findings of the Flagship project indicate that university profiles recently developed first and foremost are research-based profiles. Not surprisingly, research intensive universities want to distinguish themselves from other higher education institutions by emphasizing their research profile. This implies that part of the academic senior staff of the university is allowed to operate in a flexible way within the more centralized, formal and standardized university's structural settings. This concerns the academic staff who are considered to be the "research elite" of the university, in the sense of

those academics who are most successful in attracting competitive external research funds, as well as are highly productive in their academic output (incl. publications). These academics in general require a large room to manoeuvre, a flexible support structure, and in some cases, a separate organizational setting, such as a centre of excellence. These academics are in many respects comparable to Slaughter's "academic capitalists" (Slaughter and Leslie 1997), even though the Continental European setting brings with it that their 'clients' are in the first place research councils, and not private companies. Since the development of criteria for selecting the best researchers and their projects, as well as the peer-review processes in which these criteria are applied, are (still) dominated by the academic profession itself (Bleiklie 2012), the result is a continuous confirmation and renewal of the academic autonomy of a part of the senior academic staff of flagship universities. Success in the competition for external (basic) research funding is so important for research intensive universities that the executive structure, which has deliberately been created to improve the socio-economic performance and relevance of universities, has not been willing, or able to centralize, formalize and standardize either the application processes for external research funding, or the implementation of the most prestigious research projects and units, such as centres of excellence, that were selected for funding in the external competition.

As a consequence, there is still a strong autonomy in parts of the academic domain with respect to many organizational and governance aspects of especially basic research activities. As is shown by the preliminary findings from the underlying research project, especially the external funding of basic (or frontier) research through research councils, including the European Research Council (ERC), allows for a continuous if not increased autonomy in the university's academic domain of certain professors. The essence of this situation consists of a system in which competition for funding is assumed to result in a selection of the highest quality researchers and their projects. This has also far-reaching consequences for the interpretation of the relationship between autonomy and accountability. While the executive structure is first and foremost focused on the accountability requirements of the political and bureaucratic bodies and agencies in the university's environment, including the responsible Ministries and the national audit body, the academic staff responsible for externally funded projects identifies accountability first and foremost with the reporting to the national research council, or other agency responsible for the funding of their research project(s). An important consequence of this is the emergence of growing tensions between room to manoeuvre for the senior academic staff in the academic domain and the interpretation and operationalization of institutional autonomy and the accompanying accountability demands in the executive structure (see also Reed 2002).

## Conclusion

In this paper we have presented an analytical framework for studying the university's "living autonomy". This framework is developed as part of a research project that examines how institutional autonomy is interpreted and used inside continental European flagship universities. The framework allows us to highlight that in order to understand the implications of enhanced university autonomy, we have to go beyond the scrutiny of formal arrangements and analyze practices of autonomy within the university ("living autonomy"). Some scholars have hypothesized that formal institutional autonomy constrains the "actual" autonomy of universities (Christensen 2011). However, we contend, this is an empirical question, which can be explored first by defining what "actual" autonomy is. Our concept of "living autonomy" provides an analytical lens to investigate organizational change in the university.

We argue that major tensions inside the selected flagship universities are articulated around the collision between the norms, values, practices and appropriate sets of behaviour in the traditional academic domain versus the formal rationale and aims of the emerging institutional executive structure. The tensions between the two components of the modern European flagship university can be interpreted from an institutional perspective as tensions between two institutions. As argued by Olsen (2007):

Collisions between key institutions are an important source of change and radical transformation of one institution is usually linked to changes in other institutions. As a consequence, there is a need to clarify the conditions under which institutional reform is a fairly autonomous (internal) process, and the conditions under which internal processes are overwhelmed by wider political processes and societal mobilization.

(Olsen 2007: 28)

The increasing external demands for accountability towards the university imply shifts in the university structure and administrative support functions towards centralization, standardization, formalization. However, such changes seem to take place, at different paces, primarily in the executive structure of the university. At the same time, the academic domain appears to be largely detached from such dynamics and continues in its core activities to operate in general as before. Nonetheless, when it comes to flexibility, which is a significant dimension in university organization and governance, our preliminary findings show that this is affected, at least to some degrees, by the changes taking place in the administrative-executive domain.



The initial findings from the flagship project show that structures, processes and core activities within the flagship university are undergoing significant pressures in order for them to become adapted to the formal university strategies, goals and missions that are developed within the executive structure. In identifying and interpreting the nature of these adaptation processes further investigations are required in order to unravel whether the changes in the academic domain are incremental within fairly stable organizational and normative frames, or whether they represent changes where the legitimacy of the university's academic domain is fundamentally challenged (Olsen 2007: 28).

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