University reform and institutional autonomy: A framework for analysing the living autonomy

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Abstract

In this article we discuss recent university reforms aimed at enhancing university autonomy, highlighting various tensions in the underlying reform ideologies. We examine how the traditional interpretation of university autonomy has been expanded in the reform rationales. An analytical framework for studying how autonomy is interpreted and used inside the university is presented, which 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 analyse practices of autonomy within the university which we refer to as the university's living autonomy. Finally we introduce ideas for further research on the living autonomy with the use of our analytical framework.

1 | INTRODUCTION

University autonomy is a concept that is used to describe and examine the governance relationships between state authorities and the university, both at the level of the university system/sector as well as at the individual institutional level. The scholarly interest in university autonomy is embedded in the interest in the fields of public policy and public administration in bureaucratic autonomy, which can be defined as 'the ability to translate one's own preferences into authoritative actions, without external constraints' (Magetti & Verhoest, 2014, p. 239; see also Magetti, 2007). Hence, the question of autonomy addresses the discretion that the university has to decide in matters that it considers important (Roness, Verhoest, Rubecksen, & MacCarthaigh, 2008).

Enhancing institutional autonomy is an important issue in the current policy debates concerning the way in which the university is to be governed, organised and funded. In Europe, this has come to the fore in national higher educationreform initiatives, as well as in the European Commission's reform agendas for higher education (Commission,2006, 2011), all showing a strong belief in the relationship between enhanced institutional autonomy and the academicperformance as well as socio-economic relevance of the university. Concomitantly, over the last few decades, all overEurope the formal governance relationship between the state and the university has been modified very often implying changes in the legal status of the university and a strengthening of the formal level of institutional autonomy. In these reforms, the assumption that autonomy prompts strategic profiling of universities, thus improving performance—interpreted from an academic as well as a socio-economic point of view—has been emphasised. Consequently, a key question is: how have these reforms affected the functioning of universities and their relevance, that is, their relationship with society?

We want to contribute to the understanding of the impact of reforms by presenting an analytical framework for analysing university autonomy. This framework draws on the Flagship project, in which we studied how major research-intensive universities interpret and use institutional autonomy internally. This implies that we were not focusing on the formal autonomy of the university, but on

the factual level of autonomy. Factual autonomy is referred to in this article as the university's living autonomy. This article addresses the issue of university autonomy first by discussing the rationales underlying recent university autonomy reforms, followed by an examination of the way in which the traditional interpretation of university autonomy has been expanded in the underlying reform ideologies. Next, we will briefly review recent empirical studies on university autonomy as well as public administration literature on de facto autonomy. This is followed by the presentation of an analytical framework for studying the university's living autonomy. Finally, we will introduce ideas for further research on the living autonomy with the use of the analytical framework.

2 | RATIONALE FOR UNIVERSITY AUTONOMY REFORMS

Institutional autonomy is a key concept in ensuing university reforms in Europe. The lines of argumentation that we can observe in policy documents, reform proposals, institutional strategies and the academic literature point in the same direction. In general, it is argued that enhanced institutional autonomy will have positive effects on issues such as institutional strategic behaviour and profiling, system diversity, the socio-economic responsiveness and relevance of universities, and the quality of the university's primary processes of teaching and research (Goedegebuure et al., 1994). What is the underlying interpretation of university autonomy? A starting point is the quest to find an effective balance between society's need to have sufficient control over the university versus the university's need for an appropriate level of freedom in handling its own affairs (Clark, 1983; Olsen, 2007; Roness et al., 2008). The reason for autonomy being a key policy issue is that an ideal situation, in the sense of a stable, perfect level of institutional autonomy, does not exist. At any moment in time the debates on the appropriate level of institutional autonomy reflect the Zeitgeist, that is, the dominant underlying vision with respect to the preferable model of governing and organising society with the university as a core social institution (Olsen, 2007, 2010). This is also currently the case: national and European reform agendas promote the enhancement of university autonomy, reflecting the dominant political view on the most effective governance relationship between state authorities and society (Commission, 2006, 2011; Maassen, 2008). This is underpinned by a conviction that strategic organisational actorhood of more autonomous universities (Kr€ucken & Meier, 2006) leads to academic excellence and healthy systemic diversity.

Throughout Europe, political parties along the whole ideological spectrum have, since the 1980s, embraced this strong belief in the advantages of enhanced autonomy of public sector organisations combined with a reduced role of the state. The 2007 financial crisis intensified this belief, reflected in the current public governance Zeitgeist which is based on a dichotomy described by Mazzucato (2013) as 'a dynamic, innovative, and competitive "revolutionary" private sector versus a sluggish, bureaucratic, inertial, "meddling" public sector' (p. 15). Consequently, autonomy reforms of public sector organisations, such as universities, are aimed at making them operate more like private sector organisations.

While the effects of these reforms have been promised more than evidenced, nonetheless, over the last few decades in all European countries the governance relationship between the state and the university has been modified in this direction.

Strikingly the university reforms implemented over the last few decades have apparently not produced results that are sufficiently satisfying. We are witnessing in many European countries an almost continuous wave of public debates, policy initiatives and reform agendas aimed at providing more effective modes of governance for universities. The rationale for introducing these new governance modes is derived from increased expectations when it comes to the contributions of universities to strengthening economic competitiveness, reducing social exclusion and solving a large number of grand challenges. The university has become a transversal problem solver, but it is claimed that for the university to be able to live up to the expectations, (more) reforms are needed. The European Commission has, for example, stated that 'European higher education systems have fallen behind over the last few decades, in terms of participation, quality, and in research and innovation' (Figel, 2006, p. 3). The Bologna process is seen as a successful reform example, but it only covers one aspect of the reforms needed. What is needed is 'root-and-branch reform of the way our universities are managed, structured, funded, and regulated' (Figel, 2006, p. 5). Even though national reform proposals have not gone as far as the Commission in using negative characterisations, such as fallen behind, lagging behind, not living up to their potential and isolated from society, they also express a worry about the

functioning and performance of universities. And like the Commission, also national reform proposals assume that the perceived underperformance of the university has to be dealt with, among other things, by enhancing the institutional autonomy.

At the same time, a number of elements seem to be missing from the reform agendas. These include an operationalisation of the new role of the state, in the sense of a clarification of the nature of the adapted governance function of the state vis-_a-vis a more autonomous university sector. This element has hardly received any attention until now in the academic literature. Since it was not addressed in the Flagship project it will not be further discussed in this article.

Further, an adequate understanding of the basic institutional features of universities is discussed in more detail in another article included in this special issue, entitled 'The University Governance Paradox' (see also Olsen, 2007, pp. 26–28; Olsen & Maassen, 2007). Finally, the interpretation of university autonomy has gradually changed (Yokoyama, 2007) without this being explicitly addressed in reform proposals. This element will be discussed in the next section.

3 | EXPANDING UNDERSTANDING OF UNIVERSITY AUTONOMY

Traditionally, university autonomy has been interpreted as being related to academic self-governance and academic freedom. Academic self-governance has to do with control of academics in all university matters concerning students, staff, standards and degrees, curricula and research management (Ashby & Anderson, 1966), while academic freedom 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 example, for having offended some political, religious or social orthodoxy (Ashby & Anderson, 1966; Berdahl, 1990). Taking these two notions as a starting point, Berdahl (1971, 1990) has suggested that the concept of autonomy can be divided into two parts. The first he called substantive autonomy and is anchored in academic freedom. It deals with the basic role and mission of the university, including staff recruitment, student selection and enrolments, the nature of the study programmes taught and the research undertaken (the What of Academe). The other is called procedural autonomy and has to do with selfgovernance.

It deals with the ways that universities carry out their missions, including administrative practices and routines, and personnel policies (the How of Academe). Over the last few decades this traditional interpretation has been expanded with a growing focus on the mutually dependent relationship between autonomy and accountability. Neave (1988; see also Neave, 2001) has introduced in an early stage of this expansion the two contrasting notions of the private and public definition of university autonomy. The private definition is anchored in the concepts of academic freedom and self-governance. It addresses the right of university staff to determine the nature of their academic work (academic freedom) and refers to the purposes and functions of the universities for which the universities themselves are responsible (self-governance). The public definition of university autonomy refers to the universities' purposes and functions determined by external stakeholders, including politicians, bureaucrats, employer organisations and unions. A key aspect underlying the public definition is the influence of external stakeholders on the university. This includes the emphasis of these stakeholders on the university being accountable to them.

In more general terms the expanded interpretation of university autonomy is linked to the changes in the formal governance relationship between state and university, and the consequences of these changes when it comes to the enhanced strategic leadership capacity of the university as well as increased requirements to show how this capacity is used. This is in line with the focus on the interaction between autonomy and accountability in the public administration literature (Bladh, 2007). Tensions emerge in this respect when it comes to the nature of the university's accountability requirements, as universities have unclear goals to assess: their basic technologies—production and dissemination of knowledge—are unclear and ambiguous, for it is hard to predict the outcomes, and to link input to output (Cohen & March, 1974; Musselin, 2006; Olsen, 2007; Whitley, 2008). Furthermore, it can be argued that accountability requirements should not only encompass the managerial or contractually based means of output control, but also key elements of the pact (or social contract) that encompasses the mutual expectations and relations between universities, government and society (Gornitzka, Maassen, Olsen, & Stensaker, 2007). An additional issue is that a growing number of stakeholders have become involved in the system-level governance of universities. They have in many cases different and competing ideas on university autonomy, that is, they have diverging

views on the room to manoeuvre universities ideally should have in determining themselves how they should be organised, governed and funded, and on how universities should be held accountable. In addition, autonomy is relational—it characterises 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 institution, as is the case with other public sector organisations (Kraatz & Block, 2008; Verhoest, Rommel, & Boon, 2015).

All in all, as indicated, recent university reform initiatives strictly incorporate the private definition of autonomy and the accountability relationship between university and external stakeholders. The extent to which enhanced university autonomy should also encompass the private definition of autonomy is lacking in the reform agendas. As indicated, the assumption of university reform agendas is that reforms will contribute to more effectively functioning universities, that is, universities that provide the services they are expected to offer more effectively. How can the intended outcomes of the reform agendas be analysed through the use of the notion of the living autonomy? Before presenting our analytical framework we will first briefly discuss recent studies on university autonomy as well as general public administration literature on bureaucratic autonomy. In our view, the latter provides the linchpin from the expanded interpretation of university autonomy to the living autonomy in the notion of de facto autonomy (Magetti, 2007; Magetti & Verhoest, 2014).

3.1 | The study of university autonomy and de facto independence of public agencies

Recent studies of university autonomy in Europe have focused first and foremost on the formal external governance relationships between state and universities, that is, the public definition of autonomy. The European University Association (EUA), for example, has scored the formal autonomy status of universities on various autonomy dimensions (Estermann & Nokkala, 2009; Estermann, Nokkala, & Steinel, 2011). The results suggest that European universities may score high on financial autonomy, while organisational autonomy remains at lower levels. These and similar 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 are examples of mapping exercises not based on conceptualisations of autonomy, but rather on the use of a common-sense interpretation of key components of university autonomy. In addition, the focus is on comparatively assessing the formal autonomy status of universities in their national contexts. This implies that these studies do not provide any insights into the impact of enhanced autonomy on the functioning and performance of universities.

A 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 modernisation agenda (Commission, 2006). This study used four dimensions of institutional autonomy that are derived from a conceptual review by Verhoest, Peters, Bouckaert, and Verschuere (2004) of organisational autonomy. These four dimensions are: organisational autonomy, policy autonomy, interventional autonomy and financial autonomy. The main data source for the study was a questionnaire completed by national experts. As in the EUA study, the findings suggest a great variety in the level of formal institutional autonomy across European university systems (de Boer, Jongbloed, Enders, & File, 2010). The main challenges with respect to the validity of this study's findings are first the way in which national expert data are used for correlating levels of institutional autonomy with higher education performance. Second, the study assesses the degree of compliance of national higher education governance reforms with the Commission's 2006 Modernization Agenda. This forms the basis for a number of normative recommendations, including 'European universities should be granted more institutional autonomy overall' (de Boer et al., 2010, p. 6). The conceptual foundation of the design of the study provides an interesting insight into developments in key areas of the formal autonomy status of European higher education institutions. However, by not

using this conceptual framework in the interpretation of the findings, this study hardly contributes in a valid way to our understanding of the empirical impact of autonomy reforms. A number of studies have more explicitly addressed the tensions among enhanced formal autonomy and the real autonomy

of universities, that is, their actual room to manoeuvre vis-_a-vis their state authorities. Enders et al. (2013) have, for example, used the Netherlands as an empirical case for analysing the tensions between formal and real university autonomy. For them real autonomy refers to the room to manoeuvre universities have when one analyses limits imposed on the actual use of formal institutional autonomy by the state's control focus and demand for accountability.

The authors echo the academic literature on university autonomy from the 1980s (see, e.g., van Vught, 1989), while adding a thorough discussion on 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. Also, Christensen (2011) has emphasised that university governance reforms are a reflection of broader NPM reforms that are focusing on increasing efficiency in public organisations. Even though university autonomy is formally strengthened in many European countries in financial, management and decision-making matters, Christensen (2011, p. 504) argues that because of accountability and reporting demands, new incentive and competitive funding schemes, and other measures, reforms have actually resulted in a decrease of the real autonomy of universities. Like the mapping exercises also these investigations of university autonomy are concentrated on the formal governance relationship between state authorities and universities, guided by the assumption that the main factors affecting the actual use of institutional autonomy inside the university are external. The expectation underlying the reforms that enhanced university autonomy leads to more effectively operating institutions is not explicitly addressed. Why are internal university factors of relevance for understanding the impact of university autonomy reforms? In recent public administration literature on the autonomy of agencies, the term de facto independence has been introduced 'to connote the extent of agencies' effective autonomy as they manage their day-to-day regulatory activities' (Magetti & Verhoest, 2014, p. 240; see also Magetti, 2007). As argued by Magetti and Verhoest (2014, pp. 242–243).

'De facto independence can be seen as the combination of the two components, namely the (relative) self-determination of agencies' preferences and the (relative) lack of restrictions during their regulatory activity, both with respect to elected politicians and regulatees.' pp. 242–243. Referring to the distinction between formal and de facto autonomy of public sector agencies, including universities, we want to argue that the subjective, perceptual nature of autonomy is an important element for analysing and understanding the impact of autonomy reforms. Magetti and Verhoest (2014, p. 243) refer to the Comparative Public Organization Data Base for Research and Analysis network (COBRA) as a research community that is measuring perceptual data on organisational autonomy in a comparative perspective. At the same time, they indicate that to their knowledge 'a genuine in-depth investigation of how bureaucrats, regulators or politicians understand the concepts of autonomy and independence is lacking' (Magetti & Verhoest, 2014, p. 245). The work of the COBRA network and this observation by Magetti and Verhoest are highly relevant for our interest in the impact of university autonomy reforms. They highlight the importance of the perception of institutional autonomy for the behaviour of those who are supposed to be affected by it, and they suggest that there are hardly any empirical data on the subjective dimension of autonomy. Since this observation refers to public sector agencies in various sectors, the question can be raised how the subjective dimension of university autonomy can be conceptualised. We will address this question from an institutional perspective (Maassen & Olsen, 2007). What does an institutional perspective mean for the understanding of university autonomy and its impact? It can be argued that a comprehensive understanding of changes in university autonomy resulting from reforms within one specific system can be conceptualised regarding living autonomy. This implies that the practices of university autonomy are not only read from the formal legal terms of operation, written performance contracts or the outcome of negotiating, contending parties. While these changes in formal autonomy are of importance, university autonomy has to be understood also from the roles that universities have forged for themselves in their society. This perspective on university autonomy reflects how universities as sub-systemic units within one system have established their own remit and tested out the limits of their room to manoeuvre. Autonomy and systemic roles are path dependent and have developed in natural historical processes where identities and rules about what are appropriate actions and behaviour have progressed incrementally through experiential learning (March & Olsen, 1995). In other words, specific aspects of what is acceptable and possible with respect to university system dynamics in one country will not necessarily be acceptable and possible in another country. Learning

includes what in a cultural setting is seen as legitimate goals, beliefs, behaviour, processes, structures, resources and outcomes (Laffan, 1999, p. 253). This then suggests that impacts of reforms are to a large extent dependent on how they match with and are absorbed by existing cultures, practices and organisational identities. This implies that we can expect reforms to be institutionally filtered, and in case of mismatch, rejected or decoupled from practice. 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. To do justice to the specific institutional history and basic set of characteristics of the university we propose to include the internal perception of autonomy in the study of university reform. For this purpose, we have identified the notion of the living autonomy, that is, how university reforms are interpreted, translated, buffered, channelled and used internally. Universities are complex organisations that provide highly specialised services to society. As a specialised institution, with a unique, long institutional history, it makes up a specific, partly autonomous institutional sphere that has institutionalised its understanding of autonomy in a unique way, as expressed in the private definition of autonomy by Neave (1988). This represents specific values and norms, logics, appropriate ways of behaviour, etc. (Olsen, 2007).

If university autonomy is institutionalised 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 governmental 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. Only such an examination which goes beyond formal autonomy relationships will allow for an understanding of the real discretion of universities. Therefore, our proposal to use the notion of the living autonomy for such an examination.

In the next section we present an analytical framework for examining the university's living autonomy.

4 | LIVING AUTONOMY: AN INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS OF ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE IN UNIVERSITIES

A core part of university autonomy reforms is aimed at affecting the university's organisation and governance structures. In order to examine how change in the university's organisational and governance design is perceived internally, there are different dimensions to be considered. Here we introduce a number of dimensions that are considered of major relevance for examining university change: centralisation, formalisation, standardisation, legitimisation and flexibility.

Centralisation concerns the dispersion of authority to make decisions affecting the organisation. There are factors influencing centralisation 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 trengthening 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 organisational structure as (formal) decision making is increasingly granted to university leadership (higher degree of centralisation), while at the same time external evaluation and accountability processes reduce the practical room to manoeuvre for the institutional leadership (lower degree of centralisation). Hence, a tension between centralising and de-centralising is entailed in university autonomy reforms.

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, p. 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. 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 (Amaral, Meek, & Larsen, 2003; Keller, 1983; Rourke & Brooks, 1966), 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 centralise 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 centralisation 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. Formalisation 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 formalisation, that is, along a continuum between legal requirements and spontaneous individual ideas. Increasing autonomy (and accountability) should augment formalisation, in the sense that strengthened managerialism resulting from increased autonomy calls for formalisation of internal communications and procedures, particularly when intervening in a professional organisation, such as the university. Moreover, the growing accountability addressing performance concerning 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, pp. 46–47) from administration as 'the least noted subculture of the academic enterprise' (Clark, 1983, p. 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' (Clark, 1983, p. 138).

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 intrauniversity 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
aimed at formalising the intra-university decision-making procedures and reporting requirements. This is not necessarily achieved through the enhancement of formal institutional autonomy per se, but rather through the accountability and reporting demands that accompany this enhancement. In order to be able to be accountable and report to external agencies and actors the university leadership is expected to formalise the internal procedures, and evaluation and reporting requirements in areas such as research output, quality of education, financial administration, international cooperation, etc.
Standardisation refers to the extent to which procedures for decision-making, information provision and implementation become regularly occurring events, which are legitimised by the organisation. Increased standardisation means that there are rules that cover all circumstances and that apply invariably, while standardisation of roles implies that role definitions and required qualifications for office, titles, symbols, status and rewards become depersonalised, independent of the personal features of the persons who are in office.
Clearly, standardisation and formalisation are correlated, as standardised procedures and roles need, at least to some extent, to be formalised in order for the organisation 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 formalisation and standardisation 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.

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 institutionalise standardised procedures for the university as a whole. University autonomy reforms have aimed at professionalising administrative roles and organisation. In practice by professionalising we mean that the administrative support structure is to undergo far-reaching changes, which have been described in depth by Gornitzka and Larsen (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 standardised throughout the university. As a consequence, requirements for formal qualifications have increased for staff of administrative units, while administrative staff also has become more specialised. Specialisation 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 specialised task.

Both formalisation and standardisation 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 organisations 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.

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, pp. 186–187).

Legitimisation 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 & Cook, 1999). New practices in universities not only emerge and are spread inside the institution as a result of reform-enhanced structural changes and formalised management requirements, but also through the development within the university's academic community of collective regulatory rules, norms and beliefs (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2001). In essence, legitimisation 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, p. 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 institutionalised.

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 organisational 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 centralisation, formalisation and standardisation in the organisational design of universities, these changes do not mean that the leadership has gained 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, p. 27).

An institutional approach emphasises the robustness and resilience of the university against changing environments and deliberate reform efforts (March & Olsen, 1989). Making sense of university

dynamics requires that we take into account the density and types of institutionalised 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 legitimisation 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 legitimisation 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 is embedded in the university's institutionalised rules and practices, as well as its configurations and traditions.

Flexibility refers to the ease with which organisational 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, 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 organisation's receptivity to influences stemming from its environment and its readiness and ability to absorb them (Pugh et al., 1963, p. 307).

Whitley (2012) has conceptualised 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' (p. 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 organisation. In this way, a more comprehensive vision of organisational 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 centralisation, formalisation and standardisation. How the specific combination of the latter three dimensions affects the extent of flexibility is a matter for empirical testing.

There is still a strong autonomy in parts of the academic domain with respect to many organisational and governance aspects of especially basic research activities. Especially the external funding of basic research through research councils, including the European Research Council (ERC), can be expected to allow for a continuous self-governance oriented perception of autonomy in the university's basic organisational units. The essence of this situation consists of a system in which competition for funding is assumed to result in a selection of the most productive faculty and their projects. This has also far-reaching consequences for the interpretation of the relationship between autonomy and accountability. While the institutional leadership can be expected to be 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 faculty responsible for externally funded projects can be assumed to identify accountability first and foremost with the reporting to agencies responsible for the funding of their research project(s), as well as with the reporting to the larger academic community through their publications. In examining the effects of these dimensions 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.

5 | CONCLUSION

In this article, we have presented a review of recent university reforms, a discussion of the traditional and current interpretations of university autonomy, and an analytical framework for studying the university's living autonomy. This 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 analyse practices of autonomy within the university (living autonomy). Some scholars have hypothesised 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 or de facto autonomy is in the internal context of the university. Our concept of living autonomy provides an analytical lens to investigate organisational change in the university.

We argue that major tensions inside research-intensive universities are articulated around the collision between the norms, values, practices and appropriate sets of behaviour. This collision can be interpreted from an institutional perspective. 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. (p. 28) The increasing external demands for accountability towards the university imply shifts in the university structure and administrative support functions towards centralisation, standardisation and formalisation. However, when it comes to flexibility, which is a significant dimension in university organisation and governance, our framework suggests that this is affected, at least to some degree, by the changes taking place at the departmental level in the university as a result of the way in which the enhanced autonomy is interpreted and used by the university leadership at all levels.

Structures, processes and core activities within European universities are undergoing significant pressures in order for them to become adapted to the formal university strategies, goals and missions that are developed by the university leadership. In identifying and interpreting the nature of these adaption processes further investigations are required in order to unravel whether or not the changes at the departmental level are incremental within fairly stable organisational and normative frames, or whether or not they represent changes where the legitimacy of the traditional university's academic domain is fundamentally challenged (Olsen, 2007, p. 28).

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