

Selected Issues in Higher Education Policy – The Case of Denmark and Poland

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Introduction - Higher Education Challenges and Policy Directions

Higher education systems in Denmark and Poland are interesting not only due to their distinct stages of historical development, but mainly due to their size and complexity resulting in a particular policy. Such comparisons are based on the still valid challenges enumerated by OECD experts (Santiago, Tremblay, Basri and Arnal 2008a, 2008b) in their report *Tertiary Education for Knowledge Society* almost a decade ago. The main challenges faced by higher education and their corresponding policy directions have been grouped into the following categories: (1) steering tertiary education: setting the right course, (2) matching funding strategies with national priorities, (3) assuring and improving quality, (4) achieving equity, (5) enhancing the role of tertiary education in research and innovation, (6) academic career: adapting to change, (7) strengthening ties with the labour market, (8) shaping internationalisation strategies in the national context and (9) implementing tertiary education policy. Our earlier research on comparing public policies between Scandinavia and Poland (Dziedziczak-Foltyn and Musiał 2009, 2010 and 2015), as well as our hands-on experience with regard to their higher education systems, allows us to narrow down the broad scope of possible comparative analyses and focus on the most striking challenges: steering, quality and internationalisation. In the domain of steering the challenge of finding proper balance between governmental steering and institutional autonomy appears particularly interesting. In the domain of quality we have concentrated on developing quality assurance mechanisms for accountability and improvement. In the domain of internationalisation we found quality across borders particularly worthy of investigation. The article pursues also a more universal goal to signal out a great analytical potential of comparative higher education research even if only two countries are taken into account (Kosmützky 2016; Välimaa 2008).

Steering Higher Education

We define “steering” as guiding higher education institutions through academic governance. This article mainly focuses on external governance shaped by state authorities and its relation to internal (institutional) governance falling within the competence of universities. Our primary interest has been to explore the ways in which Denmark and Poland have been responding to the challenge of steering higher education, including the maintenance of the steering balance between governments and university authorities. According to the OECD report (Santiago, Tremblay, Basri and Arnal 2008a), in Denmark the law offered self-governance to the universities as special administrative entities in public law. In Poland there was substantial delegation of operating autonomy.

Governance in Danish Higher Education

In Denmark governance in higher education has been evolving since the 1990s in the context of a change in the rules of the game occurring in the public sector as well as a gradual withdrawal of the state from its pre-existing social contract that is typical of welfare states. In the area of higher education, greater importance has been attached to its economic function defined as its correspondence with changing social needs and the effective use of funds. Denmark has been witness to governance economization processes (the New Public Management) promoting effectiveness and efficiency in resource management, which was typical of the new management model (Aagaard and Mejlgaard 2012). These processes accentuated social and economic innovation.

The so-called development contracts made between universities and the competent ministry have become the most characteristic determiner of change in Danish higher education governance. They have specified targeted funding for all academic activities to be provided over a period of several (usually three) years. Furthermore, the contracts have covered the number of PhD students and graduates of particular fields, strategic research projects and a social stakeholder engagement strategy. The

contractual relationship between the university and the ministry has indicated and strengthened a clear tendency to introduce market principles into higher education policy. On the other hand, it has enabled the government to exercise constant and long-term oversight over universities through contract negotiation (Dziedziczak-Foltyn and Musiał 2009).

The change in higher education governance has also materialized in the form of managing councils comprising both internal and external stakeholders. Not only have they exercised supervision over other authorities and internal administration of a particular university but also they have occasionally taken decisions on signing a management contract with the rector who would enter with deans into a contractual relationship subject to an open competition. The deans, in turn, would be entrusted with the task of employing department heads. In terms of both financial control and the correspondence between intended and achieved results, the contract-related audit has contributed to the increase in the standardization of research and teaching (Taylorism) at the expense of scientific research freedom that is otherwise perceived as one of the innovation pillars. This practice has resulted in the universities creating self-imposed limitations concerning their research areas or the introduction of new ones so as not to go beyond the scope of the contract made with the ministry. Moreover, in the case of contractual employees, the practice has drawn attention to the interim results to be achieved within a few years. It has led to a paradox that emerges from the transition from control to supervision. The higher education institutions operating in such conditions have ceased to be innovative since contractualism itself in the context of research and teaching services has resulted in specific dynamics of self-control. Moreover, the proposed supervision has only been a different type of control, i.e. the self-imposed control exercised by a given institution (Dziedziczak-Foltyn and Musiał 2009).

Managing Higher Education in Poland

The nature of “Polish-style governance” in higher education in the 1990s is usually explored in the context of the post-socialist systemic transformation consisting in the restoration of democracy and economic liberalization. Poland’s 25 years of systemic transformation have witnessed both the decrease in state regulations of higher education as well as the opposite trend. In the 1990s the ideology of market economy and lack of a state education policy led to sudden higher education market growth in the form of an overdeveloped non-public higher education sector. However, it was a quasi-free market, i.e. the market subject to state control (Dziedziczak-Foltyn and Musiał

2009). It is worth noting that the state role was limited to overseeing on-going administrative work (Antonowicz 2015).

The first, post-transformation *Higher Education Act* of 1990 introduced the principles of independence of higher education from state administration, of institutional autonomy of higher education institutions, and of academic freedom (freedom of research and teaching) as well as the rules for governing higher education through indirect mechanisms. Then, the *Higher Education Act* of 2005 granted the minister competent for higher education the right to design a framework for the higher education system. The arbitrary nature of many rights granted to the minister under the Act (Thieme 2009) as well as the extension of the minister’s competence to include the right to exercise control over higher education institutions (Dąbrowa-Szeffler and Jablecka 2007) testify to the existence of the state’s tight normative and procedural corset imposed on autonomous universities through acts of law and numerous regulations (Thieme 2009). According to later projections, the autonomy of higher education institutions was rated as “the European average.” However, a low level of funding allocated for universities deprived them of flexibility in their operation comparable to other European countries (Górnjak 2015). According to OECD experts (Fulton, Santiago, Edquist, El-Khawas and Hackl 2007), from 1990 to 2008 the competences of Polish authorities remained unchanged and included steering the system through diverse financial, regulatory and evaluative mechanisms, notwithstanding some minor changes. Furthermore, the key advisory bodies, such as the state-financed Main Council of Higher Education, consisted of the representatives of academic interest groups that excluded external stakeholders. The system of governing higher education in Poland was conservative and insufficiently oriented toward social needs as well as hampered by an excessive academicism (Fulton et al. 2007; Thieme 2009).

The strong foundation for the bureaucratic-oligarchic model in Poland delayed any real reforms of higher education echoing the trends to be found in the European Union or around the world. Based on an ambitious plan to make Polish universities more entrepreneurial, a substantial amendment to the Act of 2011 on Higher Education turned out to be a “soft” change by making any innovation initiatives contingent upon consent to be granted by the university (Antonowicz and Jongbloed 2015). Nevertheless, the wide-ranging actions taken by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education to change the law (begun in 2007) and to further amend it in 2014 culminated in the academic community gradually losing its power to steer

higher education and in the state regaining its leading position in this respect (Antonowicz 2015).

Quality Assurance in Higher Education

We interpret quality assurance in higher education (QAHE) as a complex of policies, attitudes, actions, and procedures necessary to ensure quality maintenance and improvement (Woodhouse 1999, 30). The QAHE system in Poland is based on accreditation and assessment mechanisms (Santiago, Tremblay, Basri and Arnal. 2008a). The Danish QAHE model is based on the same mechanisms, though the mechanism of accreditation is secondary to the mechanism of assessment (Hopbach, Järplid Linde, Lanarès, Dias and Aho 2016).

Stable Danish Quality Policy

In the 1990s quality assurance became one of the most important issues in Danish education policy, mainly for economic reasons. In 1992 the Centre for Higher Education Evaluation was established with a view to designing programme evaluation methods, to inspiring universities to ensure quality, and to gaining both domestic and international experience. It was at that time that the foundations of the education quality assurance system became institutionalized in Denmark. The system is still based on the following: cooperation with external examiners, outcome-based auditing, and the approval of new programmes to be granted by the competent minister as well as the use of evaluation and quality assurance systems within higher education institutions (Dziedziczak-Foltyn and Musiał 2010).

Adopted in 1993, the new Act on Universities granted to academic institutions greater autonomy in terms of funding and academic programmes, which was hailed as the model of deregulation and decentralization coupled with quality assurance mechanisms. In the second half of the 1990s the idea of politics as a market action was reflected in government-sponsored reports on quality (Dziedziczak-Foltyn and Musiał 2010).

In 1999 the Centre for Higher Education Evaluation was replaced by the Danish Evaluation Institute (Danish: EVA) that significantly expanded control and quality assurance activities, while maintaining regular and mandatory evaluation of learning and teaching at all levels of the education system. Moreover, this approach also included accountability toward payers as well as the participation in the evaluation process of students, social organizations, and external stakeholders representing industry. In 2007 a new accreditation act imposed the obligation to evaluate fields of study in terms of their “usefulness” - the Minister was granted the right to delete academic programmes that failed to

generate demand or to secure accreditation. Any local and intra-institutional quality assurance solutions were replaced by the process of evaluation coupled with the system of reward and punishment given for particular quality-related actions (Dziedziczak-Foltyn and Musiał 2010). However, the results of the evaluations were not legally binding and the programme accreditation system was criticized for being overly bureaucratic and causing too much workload for the HEIs. This led to introduction of institutional accreditations as recommended by the panel in the *European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education* (ENQA) review of 2010. From 2013 focus has shifted to put emphasis on the HEIs own responsibility for the quality assurance of its programmes, the result being that institutions with a positive institutional accreditation do not form part of the cyclical programme accreditations. Only institutions not previously accredited, or with a negative result, undergo accreditations on a programme level (Hopbach et al. 2016).

Evolution of Polish Quality Assurance System

The communist period in Poland has left a mixed legacy: significant scientific and educational achievements, and the risk of illegal actions taken for decades (Fulton et al. 2007). In the 1990s the system of higher education was growing under the influence of market mechanisms. However, it was decreasingly subject to the formal engagement of the government to ensure quality in research and education, which led to many ills and irregularities exacerbated by a drastic shortage of state funds for higher education.

Such developments generated two kinds of reaction: top-down legislative initiatives aiming at quality evaluation and licensing as well as bottom-up actions taken by academic communities with a view to ensuring voluntary accreditation and oversight. Nevertheless, the quality assurance mechanisms adopted in Poland from 1990-1999 proved insufficient. Even the effective operation (since 1998) of local accreditation committees was hampered by voluntary submission to the accreditation process, and the need to ensure quality through accreditation mainly resulted from potential benefits to be gained from the operation of a university on the education market (Dąbrowa-Szeffler and Jabłeczka 2007). Therefore, in 2001 the Polish government established a central quality assurance body known as the State Accreditation Committee (SAC, Polish: PKA). Although its operation in the area of education quality evaluation was positively assessed by OECD experts in 2007, the committee was requested to reduce the supervision of higher education and instead to focus on its improvement (Fulton, Santiago, Edquist, El-Khawas and Hackl 2007). Acting on the OECD

recommendations, SAC formalized cooperation with international accreditation and quality evaluation institutions, such as the ENQA. However, the recent years have witnessed some efficiency challenges faced by SAC and a growing discrepancy between the needs and the number of controls performed by the institution (Górniak 2015).

In 2010 the Committee for the Evaluation of Research Units was established with the aim of issuing opinions and rendering expert advice as well as performing a comprehensive evaluation of scientific activities conducted by basic units of a given university. In the course of the evaluation process the units are assigned to categories ranging from A+ (leading level) to C (unsatisfactory). The categorization has resulted in the diversification of research funding allocated according to its quality (Antonowicz 2015).

The increase in education quality and improved quality of scientific research constitute two of the four main objectives set out in *the Higher Education and Science Development Programme for 2015-2030*. The Programme was adopted in 2015 as a result of multi-stage and multiannual preparations, which testifies to the fact that since the 1990s Poland has been witnessing a clear evolution with regard to designing a quality assurance system for higher education.

Strategies for Higher Education Internationalization

The concept of internationalisation includes educational programmes/activities that contribute to internationalised learning and the mobility of students and scholars (Santiago, Tremblay, Basri and Arnal 2008b). According to OECD experts (Santiago, Tremblay, Basri and Arnal 2008b), the main aim of internationalisation for particular countries is to develop a national strategy and comprehensive policy framework for internationalisation. In the case of Denmark, internationalisation has been a solid component of higher education development strategies for a few decades, whereas Poland has gradually become aware of the imperative to internationalise this sector since its increasing engagement in the European Union policies became more apparent and obvious.

The Imperative of HE Internationalisation in Denmark

The Danish approach to internationalisation is highly determined by the overall development narratives of the Danish state. Denmark is seen as a leading knowledge-based, highly innovative country that has to concentrate all its resources to remain competitive in the global economy. To this end the globalization strategies were conceived in the first decade of the 21st century as an active set of measures

preparing Denmark to face the global challenge. The strategies included a substantial component on how internationalisation of higher education was not only beneficial but it was actually key to thrive in the globalized reality. The Danish competition state (Pedersen 2011) needs the international environment as a market for its goods and products but it also needs internationally experienced knowledge workers who are perceived as a resource and competitive advantage.

The Danish Minister for Higher Education and Science maintains that while solely one percent of GDP flows to publicly funded research, the way to get the best yield on this investment is to cooperate with international partners and pursue further internationalisation of research (Tørnes 2016). Its practical result is that Denmark is among the best countries in the world when it comes to exchanging young researchers for short stays. The long term mobility and research stays abroad do not look that good, which makes the Danish state actively engage in opening Danish research and innovation centres in places like Silicon Valley or Tel Aviv. What is noteworthy is that Denmark uses also public-private partnerships to pursue such a policy. The Innovation Centre in Silicon Valley, for instance, recently established a partnership with the Lundbeck Foundation to give young and bright Danish medical students an opportunity to study and research at leading American universities.

The general tendency of the Danish internationalisation efforts is to make a transition from quantity to quality in international mobility and networking. While for many years it has been a goal in Danish universities that more domestic PhD students and postdoctoral researchers should spend part of their PhD studies abroad (Kalpazidou and Schmidt 2012), currently the university management and government authorities make an effort to stimulate not only individual projects in the international environments but the secure creation of research communities and stimulate lasting activities and effects. This is done by providing funding for top researchers from leading research environments to spend time in Denmark, interacting with both junior and senior researchers to give them access to leading international profiles. The Danish Agency of Science, Technology and Innovation has also been very active in development of lasting international research networks are framework agreements with particular universities or research environments abroad (DEA 2016a).

In the recent years international recruitment has been prioritised. Among all newly appointed assistant, associate, and full professors at Danish universities between 2011-2013, thirty-eight percent had foreign

citizenship – a percentage which has increased steadily since the period of 2004–2006. This has consequences and poses challenges for the universities to accommodate new staff and possibly make a transition to English as a language of communication. However, it goes without saying that hiring research talent from abroad is key to stimulating adequate competition for positions in Danish universities, while simultaneously raising requirements to qualify for academic positions in Denmark (DEA 2016b).

Polish Attempts at Internationalisation

Since the 1990s Polish higher education has shown greater openness to international cooperation facilitated by European programmes. However, there has been no indication of any substantial increase in future internationalisation efforts.

Notwithstanding the provisions specified in the Higher Education Act of 2005 and regarding internationalisation as a strategic objective, its level remains relatively low. The main actions taken in the area of international cooperation and exchange result from Poland's participation in developing the European Higher Education Area, particularly through the Bologna process. However, lack of a comprehensive development strategy promoting internationalisation, as indicated by OECD experts in 2007, has contributed to the low level of international student mobility. Similarly, "internationalisation at home" has been insufficiently developed (Fulton, Santiago, Edquist, El-Khawas and Hackl 2007). These developments have been confirmed by one of the lowest incoming and outgoing mobility indices in Europe, a low absorption of European research grants, and a low level of international cooperation in scientific research (Górniak 2015).

The relatively low positions of the best Polish universities in international rankings have generated discussion on internationalisation and even acted as a spur for political reforms in this respect (Antonowicz 2015; Górniak 2015). On the other hand, comparative research conducted by Marek Kwiek (2015) demonstrates that the Polish academic community is relatively well internationalised in the area of teaching, which is not the case with regard to publications and scientific research. Meanwhile, the scientific productivity of Polish scientists is strongly correlated with international research cooperation. It is noteworthy that this correlation is significantly higher in Poland than in other European countries. In this way a higher level of internationalisation is translated into higher research quality.

In recent years the discussion on internationalisation as specified in *the Higher Education and Science Development Programme for*

2015-2030 has been gaining momentum and led to the formulation of the following objective: a climb in international rankings as a sign of the internationalisation of higher education and research institutions. However, the adoption of a comprehensive strategy making internationalisation part of the development programme will not suffice without the financial assistance to be provided by the state.

Conclusions

The different patterns of higher education development in Denmark and Poland have exerted considerable influence on the approaches adopted by the countries to the main challenges faced by higher education. The main difference lies in the fact that steering and internationalisation were recognized as strategic challenges in Denmark long before they were in Poland. Therefore, Poland has a lot of catching up to do particularly in terms of internationalisation. As regards contractualism, Poland has a lot to learn from Denmark. The quality-related challenge was similarly approached in both of the countries.

This article presents three groups of challenges illustrated with selected specific examples. As this study is by no means exhaustive, it should be complemented with the analysis of the remaining challenges to facilitate our understanding of higher education policy shaped by different historical and geographical conditions.

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