Academic citizenship—Roles, rights and obligations

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Abstract

In this contribution, I wish to discuss roles, rights and obligations of different groups within universities and the collaboration both internally and externally, in relation to the many steering and control challenges that universities have faced over the last 20-30 years. The context of the article is primarily the Danish universities, which follow the European tendency towards heavy steering and control, creating more top-down governance structures, challenging the overall perception of university autonomy and of academic freedom. More specifically, the understanding of the metaphor of the academic citizen seems to evolve, with different focus on rights and obligations, in different contexts and universities. As a kind of conclusion, I would encourage academic communities to integrate all members in the understanding of the modern university community, as it has a greater aspiration and mission that cannot be met without internal and external collaboration, including the state, in a new form with a more extended arm's length.

Keywords: academic freedom; community; control; governance; steering

Initial clarification: What is an academic citizen?

A "citizen" is usually defined as a person who is a member of a particular country (or city) and who has rights and obligations in this community. "Academic" relates to education and scholarship and erudition. An academic citizen would then be a person with rights and obligations in fields such as university or other academic institutions. "Academic citizenship" seems to be a rather new concept that requires some explication or a relation to its most frequent usage in a university context. The rights and obligations may be defined differently by academic staff on the one hand, and by the institution as an organisation on the other, as rights and obligations are becoming more formalized in policy documents. These two sides of university might focus more on the rights for one and more on the obligations for the other. A related question is who are citizens and who are not: What are the rights and

obligations of administrative staff, such as academic officers and academic leaders, and of students? At a time when universities are facing important challenges from society, an antagonism between academic staff and administration or leadership is not beneficial. In this article, I will reflect on this situation, while referring to various historical and national situations.

Governance at universities: Some background

Universities have experienced different interpretations of governing structures over time: from the European medieval universities between centralized and decentralized power, more or less led by the Church; up to the 20th century professor rule, contested from 1968; and followed up in 1973 in Denmark by a new law that brought a democratic structure to faculty and department level at universities. This was implemented through a composition of councils where faculty were given 50 percent, other staff 25 percent, and students 25 percent of the seats. Study boards were given partial responsibility for education and teaching, with 50 percent student and 50 percent staff members. This change gave rise to much debate and criticism, and a new *University Act* was enacted in 1993, weakening staff and student influence in the various bodies in order to give stronger power to senior management at all levels (rector, deans, heads of departments and students), in particular by reducing the formal powers of the governing bodies and the places of other staff and students. The aim was that universities should be able to implement what was seen as necessary innovation and a more strategic direction in a rapidly changing world.

This movement was continued by the *University Act* of 2003, transforming universities into so-called independent institutions, with a board of directors as the supreme governing body. Today, heads of departments, deans and rectors are employed, not elected, and have full decision power. Study boards are still responsible for ensuring the organization, implementation and development of education and teaching (*Universitetsloven LBK nr 778 af 07/08/2019* [Danish University Act], §18, stk. 4), and approve applications for credit transfers and exemptions at program level, but all in all, with the strong demand for quality assurance and effectiveness, their participatory rights have been restricted (Andersen & Sarauw, 2016). In accordance with the *University Act*, their role is to prepare proposals for curricula and amendments thereto, while it is the rector or

dean who approves them.[1] Therefore, today the academic state has a government that it can only partially elect. The board of directors has both "external" and "internal" members (research staff, administrative staff and students), and the "external" members have a majority over the "internal" members by one person. The board has the mandate to recruit the rector who recruits the deans and and these do the same for heads of department.

The selection procedure is considered to be disturbing for democracy and ownership by some, whereas others point to the fact that it is not very different from elections in countries where electoral colleges or bodies vote on behalf of others. The major difference for the institution and its academic citizens comes from the political decision to have a board with an external majority, and the major challenge has been learning how to use it for the greater good of the university, without being overly corporate in times where ranking and competition between institutions is already dominant.

All public institutions in Denmark, as in many other countries around the world, now have a board of directors, and sometimes even an entirely external board. Indeed, the long evolution of university from being a servant of the Church to becoming a servant of the State has implications for the current range of fields of study. The central question is how the external governance and control is implemented: by ministerial regulations,[2] by a board with external majority, or by direct political interference. This is linked to the question of the purpose of universities, in different periods and in different contexts, such as public-private and regional-national, classical-reform, etc.

University community metaphors

Universities are complex organisations, and the political criticism of their relatively weak role in the global competition from the 1990's may have had to do with internal fights, disciplinary struggles and a certain degree of conservatism. Interactions inside academia did not always appear to be democratic or founded on equal rights for all faculty and employees. Academic achievements could

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[1] However, the vast majority of rights lie with the Minister. It is quite striking to notice that the Minister is mentioned 108 times in the *University Act*, while the rector and the board of directors are each mentioned 17 times, the study board 14, and the academic council 10 times.

[2] "...planlægningen, udbygningen og driften af de højere uddannelsesinstitutioner bør foregå under central styring" [...the planning, development and operation of higher education institutions should be under central control] (Undervisnings ministeriets Struktur- og Rationaliseringsudvalg 1972 [Structure and Rationalization Committee of the Ministry of Education 1972], p. 84).

sometimes seem to depend on relationships, and it was still predominantly men who were appointed as professors, department heads and received salary increases (see Krejsler, 2019). As such, the space of academics is an ever-changing kaleidoscope with a variety of conditions from the sometimes idealized Humboldtian model in a reinforced democratic version to the knowledge economy version (ibid.).

The correct metaphor for the university as an institution would hardly ever have been that of a democratic republic. Another analogy that some researcher communities have used, especially about other researcher communities, is that of a family, with an expectation of solidarity within the particular circle of the discipline (or even a certain school within the discipline). In such cases, democracy is superficial: families can have dominating fathers or grand-fathers, fights between siblings, jealousy, hatred and harassment.

In the first decade of the new millennium, the disciplines were strong, sometimes isolated, and of course important, but the decentralised and fast-growing university was still not seen by politicians and other external partners as being in tune with its surrounding community. The ivory tower was a metaphor that was still used, and inside, the silo metaphor was frequent. Disciplines were partially isolated, and in some areas the norm had become unlimited production of academic content for seemingly too few peers, with no impact on society. Robert Frodeman talks about "infinite, encapsulated, largely autonomous and laissez faire knowledge production" (2014, p. 4). Also, he prognosticates that university control over knowledge is at an end and shows the way forward, in collaboration across disciplines and consciously taking values into account: "there is a growing recognition that our problems are complex, exceeding disciplinary frames, and always involve an inseparable mix of facts and values" (Frodeman, 2014, p. 29). A new type of university is on its way, and it is engaged and problem-oriented.

The context of competition: Elitist and ranking discourses—and realities

Related to the growth of the higher education sector worldwide, including universities of applied science and professional schools, significant new concepts became widespread in the academic world from around 2000, such as: *world class, excellence, globalization, innovation, disruption, competition, ranking, elite*. On the other hand, a discourse of *community*, *collaboration* and *co-creation* developed in the world of work. The elite and ranking discourse is related to an understanding of comparability of quite different institutions, in times of globalization and institutional multiplication.

It is highly questionable whether it is possible to establish measurable criteria for quality and to generate true quality hierarchies in the form of rankings or league tables. Unfortunately, these comparisons create counterproductive incentives that do not promote quality, but rather external signs of quality. Audit procedures may not only undermine professional autonomy but also have dysfunctional consequences (Shore & Wright, 2015). There are other comparisons that are made without a real understanding of institutional specificity and complexity, such as the assessment of quality in educational programs. One example is *The Danish Student Survey* (*Danmarks Studieundersøgelse*)[3] where students' and graduates' answers to a minimum of 90 very different questions allow a 1:1 comparison of not only programs, but of full universities. No allusion is made to their different research area profiles, approaches to education, professions and disciplines, or their different interpretations of critical thinking in education.[4]

In the midst of global competition and externally driven development of universities towards business and corporate attitude, a discussion has started about the universities' real offer to society. Might it not be the education of the young generation as independent, creative, critical thinkers, as formulated in the many recipes for "21st century skills", or '*Bildung*'? And what about a much more value-based (and not primarily socio-economic) link between universities and society? The answer is probably that society expects both socio-economic relevance and critical, independent and knowledgeable academics. Academic citizenship, also for the students and graduates, consists of both.

New external demands and the academic workplace

With the current role of universities in society, students are supposed to find a job more directly after graduation, and cooperation with governments, industries and societal actors is developing. The political and socio-economic development inevitably affects the profile of universities—as it does our societies. Subject areas and relevant problems to study are challenged by markets and political demands for short-term solutions. It is therefore important for universities to engage strongly in fostering fruitful change, developing new modes of studying and doing research, engaging with society and people, and ensuring critical thinking and creativity.

At the same time, there is a new lack of trust in academia, and in the methods of especially the humanities and social sciences, with an urge for choosing

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[3] Before 2020 called *Læringsbarometer* and before 2018 *Uddannelseszoom*.

[4] Each Danish university's results are included as a basis for the calculation of up to 5 percent of their basic grant.

quantitative methods and a focus on the concept of evidence and data based realities. Politicians may not only qualify reseach methods, but also label specific areas of research and study as *identity policy* or *victimization studies* or even *pseudoscience* (Friis, 2020). This obviously has implications for universities and their researchers and students, as they affect fundamental values or key principles such as institutional autonomy and academic freedom. However, as universities are publicly funded institutions, the population may have some expectations of "compliance". We are here facing the ever-recurring dilemma between external (state or private) control and academic freedom.

Definitions of the key principles underpinning universities are well-known from the Magna Charta Universitatum, the common charter of universities, signed in Bologna in 1988. Today, it is linked directly to rights and obligations for members of the university community and their career. At the University of Alberta, a specific document on academic citizenship states that "*every* member of the university community enjoys certain rights and advantages related to academic freedom and, as a result, has a shared responsibility for academic integrity" (*What is academic citizenship?*).

There seems to be a tendency at universities to take on more administrative responsibilities and meet researchers' expectations and reactions to the many external and internal demands, coping with quality assurance, stress, publication support, funding, carreer management, gender diversity management and even academic citizenship as a regulated area of career management. Macfarlane (2007) in this context defines academic citizenship as "service", in a university recognition and promotion context, pointing to an increasingly performative academic culture. "Service" may concern students, colleagues, institutions, disciplines or professions, and the wider public. An example could be the University of York, which has a highly developed policy of academic citizenship, defined as engagement with "elements of university life that enable the smooth and collegial operation of the institution" of "demonstrable benefit" to the University. All members of staff are expected to demonstrate "good citizenship," supported by reliable evidence, for internal promotion. The list of possible activities is long, such as, for example:

- informed contribution to committees and staff meetings
- attention to deadlines
- involvement in positive promotion of the University through public engagement activities and/or open days
- effective representation of colleagues, for example as trade union representative
- support of the University's commitment to equality and diversity

- external engagement as industrial or professional liaison
- regional reputation enhancement (*Academic Citizenship*).

There is no doubt that academic staff, administrators, students and leaders work hard in order to live up to external agendas—mostly because they actually share the ambitions of contributing to community. However, in a situation of external mistrust and strongly systematized quality assurance and research management, parts of academic staff are at risk of losing interest. Setting very detailed goals for people's work and development restricts the space for their own intentionality and will, and can lead to lack of motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Nielsen, 2017), ultimately undermining the creativity and autonomy that research depends on. Purpose is connected to intrinsic motivation, but the motivation is more and more supposed to come from external factors, different types of incentives and systematic career orientation, and therefore in reality weakened (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

The academic society is clearly affected by the many changes mentioned. If certain promotions within the older university structure may have seemed to rely on networks or favours, there is a different uncertainty and anxiety within the university in times of economic crisis, related to mistrust of leaders' judgement skills and ability to allow for criticism: "It doesn't have to be true, but just the fact that you think this means that you are cautious about going against management decisions" (Myklebust, 2022).

It is not surprising that there is widespread criticism of these conditions, which are often broadly referred to as "neoliberal agendas." In Denmark, it is a common assumption that the internal problems at universities, such as less influence on managerial decisions, growing bureaucracy or too much digitalization, can be related to the *University Act* from 2003. However, as I have tried to show, the governance reform came together with a series of new challenges: a long list of new law initiatives, increasing political control and steering, stricter expectations of systematic quality assurance, measuring quality in teaching by student (customer) satisfaction, a growing urge for effectiveness and predictability, and understanding both education and research as production with a specific outcome related to planned period of time (also Bologna Reform terminology). Therefore, even with a more democratic university organization, many developments would have taken place in the same way, and with or without a board of directors or with any kind of appointment procedure for university leaders, they would still face substantial dilemmas.

The way forward as citizens: Rebuild the community

A large series of controlling measures and political interference have been counterproductive for universities, even though undeniably there was a need for regulation and more organized collaboration across disciplines and faculties, and for more strategic decisions within the university landscape, research support, educational profiles, etc. Undoubtedly, the number of political reforms over particularly the past 20 years has required a disproportionate amount of time and resources from the universities' researchers and administrative staff. At the same time, the tendency to move towards performance management has entailed predictability as an unwelcome side effect. This tendency reduces curiosity and creativity, which are fundamental ingredients in research and education. And ranking as a quality assessment tool implies calculation, excessive counting and strategic thinking.

It is a fact that university leaders are sometimes seen as part of the outside world, as they bring in quality assurance, professionalization, measuring and global homogeneity of universities. But since we want to develop as strong institutions in a complex and challenged society, we have a responsibility to build a solid basis for constructive and critical cooperation within universities, between academic and administrative staff, students, leaders and governing boards.

At the same time, politicians need to release the direct steering pressure on universities, especially after more than 20 years of very intensive quality assurance, reform and regulation. Instead of relying on control and regulation, politicians should formulate a national strategy for universities. In this way, they could indicate how universities can constructively contribute to meeting current and future challenges and developing our society, and how the state will support this.

The governance structure of public institutions needs close collaboration with the external world for whom the institutions exist. They should be the supporters and critical friends of modern universities. The composition of university boards with an external majority, but with important internal representation from both administrative staff and students, can be a good governance structure, if institutions' leadership teams and collegial bodies can collaborate more openly and have their different roles more clearly defined.

Author biography

Hanne Leth Andersen is Professor and Rector at Roskilde University, Denmark. She holds a PhD in French Language (1997) and an MA in Romance Philology (1990). Hanne has substantial experience in executive management and international consultancy. She chairs the educational committee of the Danish Rectors' Conference, and has experience as member of councils, committees, and executive boards in Denmark and abroad. Her primary research areas are education, foreign language didactics and university pedagogy, particularly development of teaching and exam forms, evaluation, and quality. She is author of more than 120 scientific articles in Danish and international journals and several monographs.

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