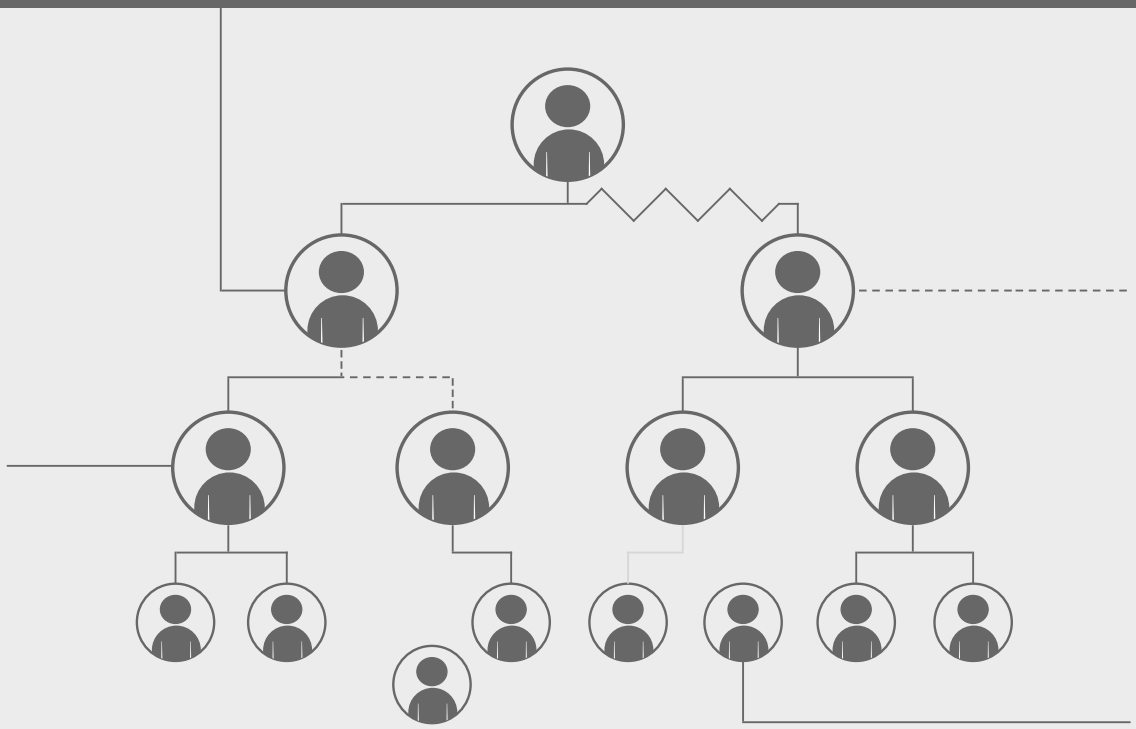
UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN
FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

The Challenged Hierarchy

How internal responses to reforms have affected the hierarchy in Danish universities

Jonas Krog Lind



DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN
PHD DISSERTATION 2019 · ISBN 978-87-7209-293-5

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PhD dissertation 2019 © Jonas Krog Lind
ISBN 978-87-7209-293-5 (printed book)
ISBN 978-87-7209-308-6 (e-book)
Printed by SL grafik, Frederiksberg, Denmark (slgrafik.dk)

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PhD dissertation

August 2019

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Abstract

This PhD thesis is about how internal responses to a range of reforms have affected the hierarchy in Danish universities. Drawing on case studies in two Danish universities – where interviews, register data and a survey represent the main empirical material – I analyse how actors through institutional work (T. B. Lawrence & Suddaby 2006) and organisational translation (Kjell Arne Røvik 2007) have reacted to management, research funding and research evaluation reforms. Under the headline of *the challenged hierarchy*, I emphasize that the hierarchy in universities has been challenged, but that managers have taken up the challenge and have been partly successful in their efforts. By doing so, the dissertation both generally confirms, but also suggest some modifications to, the thesis put forward by Ivar Bleiklie and colleagues that universities should be characterised as *penetrated hierarchies* (Bleiklie et al. 2015, 2017).

Resume (Danish)

Denne ph.d.-afhandling undersøger, hvordan interne reaktioner på en række reformer har påvirket hierarkiet på Danske universiteter. Afhandlingen trækker på casestudier gennemført på to Danske universiteter, der hovedsageligt er undersøgt gennem interviews, registerdata og en survey, og analyserer, hvordan aktører gennem institutionelt arbejde (institutional work) (T. B. Lawrence & Suddaby 2006) og translation (organisational translation) (Kjell Arne Røvik 2007) har reageret på ledelses-, finansierings- og evalueringsreformer. Under overskriften *det udfordrede hierarki* (the challenged hierarchy), finder jeg, at hierarkiet er blevet udfordret, men at udfordringen er blevet taget op af ledere, der har været delvist succesfulde I at opretholde hierarkiet. Gennem denne analyse bekræfter jeg, men stiller også spørgsmålstegn ved, visse elementer i tesen om, at universiteter bedst karakteriseres som penetrerede hierarkier (penetrated hierarchies) (Bleiklie et al. 2015, 2017).

Acknowledgements

Like most scientific endeavours, writing a PhD dissertation is not the results of one person's efforts, but involves contributions, support and help from a number of people. A first gratitude goes to my supervisor, professor Hanne Foss Hansen, who not only has been an inspiration and guide for my PhD project, but also a collaborative partner in collecting data and writing articles. It has been a pleasure to work so closely with a skilled, patient and committed scholar as Hanne.

I would also like to thank all the members of the FINNUT-PERFECT research project, of which this dissertation is a part. I am especially thankful for the help and support I have received from the PI of the project, professor Romuló Pinheiro. I would also like to extend my gratitude to professor Bjørn Stensaker, who welcomed me on a research stay at Oslo University and commented on my early writings on my PhD. Lastly, I would like to thank all the other members of the FINNUT-PERFECT team for interesting discussions, cultural exchange and the work on joint articles.

I am also very thankful for all the colleagues, and eventually friends, I have gotten in the Department of Political Science at the University of Copenhagen. First, I am thankful for the excellent PhD group in the department. In times of frustrations, you have been a great support. Secondly, I would like to thank the public administration group for interesting discussions on a variety of papers and for the comments you were kind to give on the papers I presented. A special thanks goes to my two "roommates" in the PhD group, Benjamin Carl Krag Egerod and Malte Dahl, without whom doing the PhD would not have been as fun. I would also like to thank Christian Rostbøll, the PhD programme coordinator in the department, for patiently answering all my questions and for helpful conversations throughout my time as a PhD student.

I would like to thank all the colleagues who aided my PhD project in commenting on early versions of the papers in this dissertation: Peter Dahler-Larsen, Anne Mette Møller, Andreas Kjær Stage and Kaare Aagaard. I am especially grateful for all the help from the two committee members in my pre-defence, Caroline Howard-Grøn and Niels Ejersbo. Your comments were instrumental in bringing necessary, and rather big, changes to the frame of the dissertation. I would also like to thank Hjalte Bonde Meilvang for comments on my papers and for many discussions with departure in our mutual interest in the sociology of quantification.

1. Introduction

Universities are essential institutions in modern society. While their centuries long history in itself can be seen as a testimony to the resilience of universities, the development in the last half of the twentieth century has cemented them as pillars of society. With the massification of universities during the 1960's, and the consequent increasing costs of education and research, universities moved further up the national political agendas. Universities increasingly came to be seen as drivers of economic growth. However, along with the great expectations also came new demands on universities. National authorities introduced reforms with the aims of making universities more attentive to society's needs (Olsen 2007).

Especially since the turn of the century, also international organisations, like OECD, The World Bank and the EU-commission, have emphasized the crucial role of universities in a globalized, competitive world economy. In this recent era of university, science and higher education policy, the EU commission expressed the worry that European universities were losing ground to universities in North America and Asia. Making European universities able to compete internationally became the goal of a ´modernisation agenda', promoted through, for example, the Lisbon Strategy from 2000 (Maassen & Olsen 2007). To foster more competitive universities, the reform efforts across Europe have been inspired by a very similar template, although with varying scope, policy instruments and depth of implementation. By introducing a range of measures from a common New Public Management inspired reform repertoire – management and governance reforms, performance funding and management, evaluation and accountability measures, external funding promotion, etc. – authorities hope to promote a new *modus operandi* for universities in which more focus is on performance, efficiency and society's needs (Ferlie et al. 2009).

An important prerequisite for making universities more productive, competitive and attentive to society's needs, in the eyes of reformers, was to enhance the strategic capacity of universities (Whitley 2008). It was important that managers in universities had the formal authority, and the appropriate incentives, to act as strategic actors in a competitive market. These thoughts followed a global script that promoted traits of 'proper', or 'complete', organizations to the reform of universities (Hasse & Krücken 2013). Developing a formal hierarchy – with an authoritative centre, coordination and control of activities, management accounting techniques and clearly stratified managers and subordinates (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson 2000) – was central to this end.

The Danish case is an interesting one in a European perspective. From being viewed as reform laggards, Denmark has moved far, compared to other European countries, in promoting a range of governance reforms in Danish universities since the turn of the century (Aagaard 2012; Degn & Sørensen 2015). Management has been reformed with the introduction of boards with external