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Sine Sunesen's Opening Speech

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Introduction

Welcome to this AC-hearing on the university evaluation 2009 which we are able to host in such beautiful surroundings.

Almost seven years ago, in 2002, AC hosted a similar hearing in connection with the University Reform. Back then, AC suggested that an external evaluation of experience with the new Act should be initiated after a few years. The objective was a broad and reasoned assessment of the need for adjustments where necessary.

Everyone present here today knows that it was a comprehensive and wide-ranging reform. In the meantime, several universities and sector research institutions have also gone through an extensive merger process. This means that AC welcomes a university evaluation in 2009 even more.

I think that the 2002 AC assessment is still valid. This is also why AC is looking for political willingness and action to collect experience and furthermore to adjust the reform, if necessary, in 2009.

Being the main organisation for people with university degrees, it is only natural that AC is interested in creating the best conditions for ensuring high quality, breadth and diversity in research and research-based education.

Therefore AC's primary aim with this hearing is to add to an open and unbiased dialogue about experience with the University Reform and the financial and managerial framework which control the education and research efforts of the universities.

The same spirit is at the heart of today's hearing, with three "witness panels" and a panel of politicians where different views and experience may provide for an open and broad debate.

According to the wording on the front page of the October 2002 political agreement, the University Reform aimed at "Stronger management, greater freedom and stable finances".

An evaluation of the University Reform will naturally start from these aims in order to assess whether the intentions behind the Reform have been fulfilled.

We all know that the reform of management was a particularly central element in the University Reform because it ended the collegiate management.

Let me establish this right away: AC found the reform of management necessary because the collegiate management had some obvious weaknesses; weaknesses such as slowness in the decision-making process and unproductive power-struggles between peers. Collegiate management found it difficult to manoeuvre the universities in relation to surrounding society with its reasonable demands and expectations of the universities' contribution to knowledge-building in society.

Whether the two other aims, "greater freedom" and "stable finances", have been fulfilled is rather more questionable, to put it diplomatically.

It is positive that the Danish government, supported by a majority of the parties in the Danish Parliament, has committed itself to the objective of the Barcelona Summit to invest 1 per cent of GDP on research.

At the same time though, the actual research policy has meant that the basic funding of universities has been hollowed out. In 2008, basic funding only made up 55 per cent of the total research funding; a decrease from 65 per cent in 2004.

The political negotiations this autumn about the financial framework of the universities once again showed, as I see it, the untenable situation caused by insecure budgets following annual negotiations on the Finance Act.

Notwithstanding the billions in the Globalisation Fund, we would have seen a further decrease in proportion of basis funding in the total research funding of the universities to 54 per cent, if it had not been possible to find more basis funding in the negotiations on the Finance Act in the autumn 2008.

The consequence of the Finance Act is that, on the one hand politicians have granted more money for public research, but on the other hand an ever larger share of this funding is being assigned in such a way that universities are unable to prioritise their own research. To me, this kind of policy is the greatest threat to free research for researchers and universities.

It is clear that, if broadness and diversity in research is to be ensured, the universities must have unfettered long-term funding at their disposal to make their own priorities and implement new initiatives. The political majority behind the university agreement in 2002 supported precisely this freedom to establish stronger management.

As an introduction to the 2009 evaluation, AC carried out a round of visits to academic staff, heads of institute, rectors and chairmen at the Danish universities. For us the aim was to discuss with a wider range of actors at the universities what the reality of the universities looks like from the viewpoint of management and individual researchers.

The most significant common denominator of the visits was a general frustration over the decrease in funding to initiate research projects freely. Furthermore the actors were frustrated and concerned that an ever growing amount of their budgets is to be acquired via external research funding.

AC shares the concerns of researchers and university management that the fact that universities' research funding is made subject to competition results in short-term research, less risk-bearing research, and limitations in the broadness and diversity of research, thus hollowing out research-based university education.

Free research calls for unfettered funding, and so the present conditions put free research under considerable pressure. This picture is supported by the member survey of senior lecturers and professors carried out by the Danish Association of Masters and PhDs. According to the survey, more than 71 per cent answer that within the last year the economic situation has limited the possibility for doing research in areas freely chosen by the researcher. The survey also shows that 83 per cent of associate professors and full professors answer in the negative when asked whether they have found it necessary to give up research projects because management would not support them.

Therefore, I find it necessary to warn against talking about free research or lack of it as a conflict between management and researchers, when the real threat to free research comes from the scarce amount of unfettered funding for the individual researcher to initiate research projects.

Similarly, it is a political misunderstanding to believe that if public research funds are allocated directly to universities as basis funding research, they will not be subject to prioritising. Such a belief can only be seen as devaluation and mistrust of university managements' abilities and willingness to prioritise and make research strategies.

Therefore, AC is extremely satisfied to note that the mandate for the university evaluation in the political negotiations has been expanded with the extra issue about degrees of freedom, including the framework for economic and legal regulation of universities.

I hope that the evaluation panel will give the issue about free research and degrees of freedom a central position in the university evaluation. Six years after the university reform, we still need to find the right balance between politically initiated research on the one hand, and on the other hand the individual researcher's opportunity to initiate research projects within the research strategy of the institution.

As I said earlier, AC agreed and still agrees that it is necessary to strengthen university managements. But having said that, I also find a need to stress that a stronger management should not hinder inclusion of staff to create a sense of joint ownership and responsibility among the academic staff in strategic and decision-making processes. This is a general necessity in modern management and is especially relevant at universities.

At the same time, I also wish to acknowledge that the previous system had some values that we need to be careful not to replace unintentionally with a new "salary-earning" culture where although researchers do their jobs, they are not dedicated and do not take responsibility for the life of the institute.

Undoubtedly, the dedication and joint ownership of staff are invaluable resources at universities. There is some truth in saying that what we may call first-generation management at universities has focused on being powerful decision-makers. The

next step, second-generation university management, will certainly be to strengthen cooperation between the management and the academic staff.

To me, the influence of academic staff is not a matter of formal rules for or against democracy, it is rather a matter of how the management actually ensures that the academic staff are involved in the decision-making and strategy processes.

For example it is in no one's interest to decouple the Academic Council from academia, and in many places reduce it to being merely a body for awarding academic degrees. Actually, the Danish University Act states that the Academic Council is responsible for informing the rector about the internal distribution of grants, and that the Academic Council may express its opinion about all academic issues essential for the operation of the university.

In the same way, there will probably be a need to look more closely at the influence of academic staff at institute level. In the remarks to the Danish University Act, it says that the head of the institute should build an organisation to manage the overall tasks of the institute by including academic staff, technical and administrative personnel and the students. Experience shows, however, that the various institutes organise themselves very differently.

My advice to university managements is that, with inspiration from "best practice" for staff involvement, they take care to establish structures that are adapted to their institutions, thereby ensuring that the academic staff are actually involved in essential strategic and decision-making processes.

The last issue concerning the evaluation that I will mention here today, is the link between research and education.

I believe that most will agree that the aim of anchoring education managerially in the Danish University Act has not quite been achieved. Whereas the management of research is solely the responsibility of the head of the institute, the Danish University Act divides management of education into three parts: the head of faculty, the head of the institute, and the board of studies. Among other things this means that responsibility for managing financial aspects and quality of education is also divided.

I have talked briefly about the importance of the basis funding for the quality of education. First of all, the problem is that external foundations' research issues do not necessarily correspond with the research which is to ensure research-based education. Second, dependency on external funding raises an incentive to release researchers from education, leaving actual education to teaching assistants with no right to do research.

When the head of the institute has a clear responsibility for the research and financial aspects, but is not responsible for the quality of education, then it may very well be that the board of studies wish Professor Smith to take care of the education. But the structure of incentives works otherwise, and therefore the head of the institute sends teaching assistant Jones instead, because the Professor has been released from education due to an externally financed research project.

Altogether, relevant questions should be asked about the desirability of having so detailed provisions about the organisational framework for education, when the re-

ality is that many education programmes, for example cross-faculty programmes, are not tied to one institute or one faculty.

Therefore, I hope that the evaluation panel will also have a closer look at the organisational bonds of the education programmes and evaluate these closely. It may prove more desirable to substitute the detailed provisions in the Danish University Act with a description of the considerations of quality and clear managerial responsibility as a foundation for the organisation of education programmes.

Conclusion

Finally, let me comment on the approaching evaluation.

The political parties behind the Danish University Act have agreed on which evaluation issues to deal with. These evaluation issues are found in the agreement on the organisation regarding content of the evaluation. I would like to emphasise that AC views these issues as crucial issues for evaluation. What other issues the evaluation team finds necessary to evaluate should be free for them to choose.

To me, it is also absolutely crucial for a useful evaluation that the panel is able to relate to the realities, and not just how things are described in the Act. So it is vital that the methodology of the evaluation is comprehensive and inclusive, and I see today's hearing as a contribution to the overall university evaluation.

I have also been told that the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation has ensured that the evaluation panel receives a summary of today's hearing, so that the hearing will form a part of the background material for the work of the panel.

With these words, I will give the floor to Adam Holm, who has promised to lead us safely through today's debate...