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The University Evaluation 2009

Meeting between AC and the evaluation panel 25 August 2009

Being the main organisation for people with a university degree, it is only natural that the quality, breadth and diversity in research and research-based education have a particularly high priority in AC's political work. This is also why AC has welcomed the decision regarding a university evaluation. As input to the evaluation, AC visited Danish universities in 2008 and talked to both academic staff and management, and AC also hosted a public hearing on the university evaluation in January 2009.

On the basis of responses from a broad spectrum of university stakeholders, AC has identified a number of conditions related to the Danish University Act as well as to the funding, steering and regulation instruments that have direct or indirect impact on the quality of research and research-based education programmes and that may be improved through a number of adjustments.

Autonomy

According to the wording on the first page of the October 2002 political agreement, the University Reform aimed at "Stronger management, greater freedom and stable finances". The reform has changed the management of the universities, but whether the two other aims, "greater freedom" and "stable finances" have been fulfilled is rather more ambiguous, to put it diplomatically.

Even though the total amount allocated to public research has increased over recent years, an increasing proportion of this funding is being assigned in such a way that universities are less able to prioritise their own research. AC shares the concerns of researchers and university management that too large a proportion of research funding for universities is subject to competition. This results in short-term research, less risk-bearing research and limitations in the breadth and diversity of research, thus hollowing out research-based university education. As free research calls for unfettered long-term funding, the present conditions put free research under considerable pressure.

At the same time an analysis by McKinsey of the funding and organisation of universities and sector research institutions (from June 2009) shows that with regard to obtaining external funding for research, academic staff are spending a total of 10.4 per cent of their resources on preparing and writing applications. Instead these resources could be used on free research and could benefit research-based education schemes. AC suggests that as a minimum basic funding should amount to 60 per cent of research funding, and funding in competition should be limited to a maximum of 40 per cent. Since basic funding constitutes less than 60 per cent of total research funding today, a larger share of new funding, at present the globalisation funding, should be allocated as basic funding.

AC finds that one of the most important reasons for the imbalance in the universities' research funding is the fact that the Ministry of Finance is hesitant to give the institutions more autonomy. The Ministry of Finance's wish to control universities remains clearly intact, regardless of the fact that the idea behind the university reforms in 2002 was more decentralisation and the right to independent economic initiatives.

This is particularly clear in the Ministry of Finance's reluctance to increase basic funding and in the demands from many political parties to use funding from the Globalisation Fund for purposes outside the original aim of this new research funding. Furthermore, new control measures are constantly being introduced through the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation and the State Employer's Authority resulting in heavy bureaucracy and a sense of mistrust. Moreover it only leaves little room for the autonomy of the universities.

AC proposes that, prior to the 2010 Finance Act negotiations, a principle of agreement concerning a future political steering code should be established with the aim of securing long-term funding for universities. An explicit result of such a code should be that both political and central administrative systems steer and monitor targets and results of the university sector in the future. Steering according to targets instead of funding will at the same time give an opportunity to alleviate administrative burdens once the institutions are no longer controlled according to the nature and the extent of their funding.

In addition, the centralised control by the State Employer's Authority in matters regarding fixing allowances and salaries is very counter-productive to the efforts to place Danish universities among the top international league. AC suggests that a new set of guidelines for salary formation at universities should consist of two elements. Firstly, a central agreement including at least a minimum wage etc. Secondly, local agreements including a greater or lesser degree of flexibility in salary formation at university level.

Freedom of research

The explanatory notes to the Danish University Act state that "the individual researcher enjoys freedom of research within the academic field of his/her employment, although bound by the obligations arising out of the employment. This means that the individual researcher can freely choose methodology, approach, and subject within the research strategies of the university as laid down in the performance contract." So the Act is very clear about the freedom of research for all academic employees.

On the other hand it may be necessary to specify in more detail the application of the power to issue instruction, see section 17(2) of the Danish University Act, because the present wording entails a risk of compromising the individual freedom of research. In section 17(2) of the University Act, it says that "the Head of Department may allocate specific tasks to specific employees" and the notes to the Act state that "to the extent that a researcher is not instructed in any such tasks, a researcher is free to conduct research within the research strategies of the university".

In addition to the power to issue instruction, AC finds that it should be specified that "a researcher cannot be detached from a research theme which has been chosen freely," as was suggested by the Rector of the University of Copenhagen Ralf Hemmingsen at the AC hearing on the university evaluation in January 2009.

Section 2(2) of the Danish University Act states that "the university has academic freedom and shall safeguard this freedom and ensure the ethics of science." AC suggests that this provision be specified in more detail to make it clear that the rector, as the most senior member of the day-to-day management, will protect the freedom of research and the ethics of science.

Managerial legitimacy and co-determination of academic staff

The Danish University Act states that the academic council is responsible for advising the rector (or head of faculty) about the internal distribution of grants, and that the academic council may express its opinion about all academic issues essential to the operation of the university. In spite of this, the academic councils appear to be decoupled from academic life and to be de facto reduced to a body for awarding academic degrees.

But to have the academic council operate in accordance with the Act, AC finds it necessary at the same time to ensure that council members actually mirror the weight of the research being conducted at the faculty. Key actors among the academic staff, including research leaders of large-scale research programmes, should hold a significant position in relation to the faculty's discussions on research and teaching strategies with the management.

As regards ensuring the legitimacy of management, AC suggests that the Danish University Act should specify how academic staff is to be included when recruiting a new head of a department. The body that must be established at department level in accordance with the explanatory notes to the Act could play a natural role in appointing academic employees to the recruitment committee. At the same time consideration should be given to including the note in the Act itself.

In the same way, AC suggests that a new provision should be included in the Danish University Act concerning the role of the academic council in the recruitment procedure for heads of faculty and rectors. At present, the academic council submits recommendations to the rector on the composition of a competent committee to assess applicants for academic positions. This provision should be extended so that the academic council also recommends academic employees for a recruitment committee when recruiting rectors and heads of faculty.

The dedication and joint ownership of academic staff are invaluable resources at universities. This is why it is important that management secure appropriate co-determination for the academic staff, especially at department level. AC suggests that in the same way academic staff's research and teaching are subject to quality evaluation, the head of department, being the person responsible for the department's research and teaching should also be subject to evaluation on a regular basis. It is not in the interest of the university to have a head of staff that for one reason or the other is not suited for the job.

Management of education

The 2003 Danish University Act has not succeeded in creating a sound managerial anchorage for education, as the Act divides management between the head of faculty, the head of department and the head of studies/board of studies. One of the consequences of this is that the managerial responsibility for the finance and quality of education is divided.

Altogether it can be questioned whether it is desirable to have so many detailed provisions regarding the organisational framework of the education programmes when reality shows that many programmes, e.g. interdisciplinary programmes, are not anchored in the academic area of one single department or one single faculty.

Instead AC suggests that the present detailed provisions of the Danish University Act concerning the organisation of education programmes should be replaced by a framework provision that considers an unambiguous positioning of management responsibility for both quality and finances as a foundation for the organisation of education programmes.