“Higher Education Policymaking in Scandinavia: Committees of Inquiry and Permanent Councils as Structural Couplings between Politics and Academia”

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Abstract

This paper takes as its starting point the problem of coordination across various function systems (such as research, education, politics, and the economy) under the modern conditions of functional differentiation (as analyzed by Durkheim, Parsons, Luhmann, and others). Informed by the systems theoretical concept of "structural coupling" the paper investigates a frequently used mechanism for coordination in the policy field of higher education, namely the temporary committee of inquiry. The empirical materials discussed pertain to five such committees of inquiry in Norway, spanning a period of almost fifty years: The Kleppe Committee (1960-61), The Ottosen Committee (1965-70), the Hernes Committee (1987-88), the Mjøs Committee (1998-2000), and the Stjernø Committee (2006-2008). Comparisons are made with the use of temporary committees in Denmark and Sweden, especially in the 50s and 60s.

More specifically, the paper investigates the rationale behind the use of temporary committees of inquiry, the contexts and procedures of committee work, the selection of members to sit on committees, and how the criteria for selection seem to have changed over time. It also discusses the use of temporary committees as compared to an alternative coordination mechanism which in Norway has been repeatedly suggested by several of the committees of inquiry themselves, as well as by parliamentary committees since the 1970s, namely a national standing committee or council for higher education. Such a body was established around 1970 in both Denmark and Sweden, but not in Norway. The paper concludes by discussing some possible explanations for this discrepancy.

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Introduction

Political “governance” or “steering” is still a frequent topic in higher education studies, although very few researchers today seem to believe that the political system can actually “govern” or “steer” higher education.¹ Even in Scandinavia, where almost all of higher education is publicly owned and funded, it is obvious that governmental organizations cannot unilaterally devise higher education policies and expect, upon communicating these to higher education institutions, to have their orders carried through just like that. Higher education operates under the condition of autonomy, which means that its core activities – curricula-development, teaching, assessment, etc. – has been differentiated from political, religious, economic, and other societal practices to the extent that none of the latter can legitimately instruct the former in how to perform them.

On the other hand, higher education is obviously not free to do develop in just any direction. As in earlier times, universities and colleges need to consider the hand that feeds them. And with the enormous increase in public investments brought on by the massification of higher education from the 1960s onwards, there has been a corresponding increase in the dependence of HEIs on governments. Viewed from the perspective of HEIs, this dependency has been experienced as an increased exposure to political “pressures” – taking the forms of stated goals, reporting regimes, rules and regulations.

From these initial remarks, two problems seem to emerge. The first one is theoretical: How can it be possible that modern higher education experiences increased autonomy and increased dependency vis-à-vis the political system at the same time? Usually, these two concepts are considered antinomies – autonomy is seen as the liberation from dependency. But as Niklas Luhmann has demonstrated autonomy and dependency are not only compatible, but actually presuppose each other². Furthermore, as the case of higher education vs. politics indicates, at the societal level (although not necessarily for individual organizations) autonomy and dependency even tend to reinforce each other. Paradoxical as this might seem, the reason for it is actually rather simple: Precisely because the various subsystems of modern society are becoming ever more specialized and autonomous in the performance of their core functions, they are also becoming more dependent upon other subsystems to perform their functions.

The other issue which comes to mind, and which will be the focus of this paper, is the more practical problem which arises under these conditions at the level of organizations: Given that neither political steering nor absolute self-rule is possible for higher education, how can coordination be achieved between, on the one hand universities and other HEIs, and on the other hand political organizations?

¹ In some corners of the social sciences the term “governance” seems to be reserved mostly for the intra-organizational (meso) level, whereas other terms (such as “public policy” or “steering”) are used for the macro level, but no real consistency in terminology can be observed.
² The often used concept of «relative autonomy» does not capture this. Cf. Luhmann and Schorr (2000): “[A]n increase in autonomy cannot be thought of as a reduction in dependence and an increase in independence – as if relations to the environment is set at a constant sum. Instead, an increase in autonomy presupposes combination-based levels, from which it is possible to reach both more dependencies and more independencies” (p. 59). Cf. also Luhmann (1995): “Autonomy means choosing how one concedes dependence on the environment” (p. 204).
In the terminology of systems theory, such inter-systemic coordination under the combined conditions of autonomy and dependency is called “structural coupling” – in this case primarily between the function systems of education and politics, but involving also the systems of research and the economy. I shall not go into the many complexities this concept entails, which have been the topic of much debate within the tradition of systems theory in sociology and neighboring disciplines. Suffice it to say that “structural coupling” in this paper is meant to signify the alignment of the most important structural elements of two or more systems in order to make these systems capable of mutually influencing each other at the structural level – while remaining autonomous at the operational level. The last part is important as it is a central tenet in systems theory – which space prevents me from discussing here – that social and societal systems are radically closed from each other at the operative level, which means simply that operations in e.g. the political system are dictated by a logic which is inherently different from the one which applies to education, or research, or the economy. Thus, any procedure of structural coupling between such radically different systems is understood to be a vexed affair with no guarantee of success.

In what follows I will investigate one solution to this problem of “structural coupling” in the process of higher education policymaking, namely the governmentally appointed temporary committee of inquiry. More precisely I will consider such committees in the policy field of higher education in Norway from the 1950s onwards, compared to policymaking arrangements in Sweden and Denmark. My interest in this topic stems from work I am currently doing on humanities education in Norway, which has led me to ask why the development of Norwegian higher education has been so dependent upon policies articulated by temporary committees. Since 1960 there has been five of them, and with the exception of the last one each has made a profound mark on Norwegian higher education.

To try and explain why this procedure for policymaking has been used over and over is not easy, however. Viewed historically, there was of course a particular set of circumstances which occasioned the appointment of each of the committees. Viewed more abstractly, in the style of the social sciences, it would of course be possible to draw up a list of general pros and cons for using temporary committees of inquiry, but then the historicity of the trajectory they form – and the impact previous ones have had on later ones, as well as the changes in relationship between each committee and its environment – would be lost. In this situation – familiar to most social scientists – I opt for a methodological invention from systems theory which Jürgen Schriewer has named “a functional-cum-configurational model of comparative explanation.” This is a negative form of explanation, structurally similar to cybernetic explanation, which consists in viewing the phenomenon to be explained as a solution to a problem, and then to compare it with other “functional equivalents.” Or, as Schriewer puts it, “comparative analysis turns into an explanatory argument insofar as it succeeds in identifying, by way of conceptually informed reconstructions,

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historically realized problem solutions as particular realizations of what is structurally possible in differing socio-cultural settings or configurations.\(^8\)

In keeping with this, I will in the following supplement an historical exposition of the Norwegian use of temporary committees with ditto in Sweden and Denmark, but equally important I will compare this method of structural coupling with a “functional equivalent,” namely the kind of permanent councils or agencies which were established in Sweden and Denmark in the last half of the 1960s, but not in Norway – not until many years later, and then with other functions.

**Committees of inquiry and the corporate system**

The committee of inquiry is not a modern invention, nor is it particularly associated with the policy field of higher education – or research, for that matter. In Scandinavia the use of such committees has historical roots in the guild system growing up around the monarch under absolutism in the 17th and 18th centuries. In the first half of the 20th century it was activated as an effective societal coordinating mechanism in times of crises, such as the world wars and the Great Depression. From these experiences grew the many committees, councils, boards, and other bodies we associate with postwar “corporatism,” a fascinating story which space prevents me from exploring here\(^9\).

In the following I will concentrate on the **temporary** committee of inquiry. Although it is usually counted as a subcategory of committees and as such belonging to what the literature calls “the committee system,” it should be noted that the use of temporary committees of inquiry does not necessarily indicate a high degree of corporatism or neo corporatism as defined by Schmitter and others\(^10\). As we shall see, the reverse may be true. The recurrent use of temporary committees may indicate adverse conditions for establishing permanent committees.

Before we look more closely at temporary committees of inquiry in the field of higher education, a brief summary of how this kind of policymaking takes place in practice might be convenient. While practice varies between the Scandinavian countries, and have also been subject to significant changes over time, we may outline a sequential order based on the Norwegian system which has remained relatively stable through the period 1960-2000, and which we can use as a point of reference:

1. **Appointment.** The initiative to appoint a committee of inquiry usually comes from a ministry, but it may also come from Parliament. In either case it is the Cabinet which decides whether and sometimes how to do so. On the basis of the Cabinet decision, the ministry in question will finalize the mandate and decide upon leadership and membership of the committee.

2. **Preparation of committee report.** The committee prepares its report, or set of reports, in compliance with the mandate and some very basic regulations and then presents its report(s) to the ministry, at which time it (they) are also made public. The report will typically contain an analysis of the problem complex and a set of policy recommendations.

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10 Schmitter (1974)
3. **General hearing.** Upon reception, the ministry organizes a public hearing on the report, giving concerned parties an opportunity to comment.

4. **White paper.** After the hearing the ministry (usually) prepares a white paper for Parliament, containing a summary of the committee report and the statements from the hearing, as well as the commentary and policy proposals of the ministry (which will by then have been approved by the Cabinet).\(^{11}\)

5. **Parliamentary debate and decision-making.** Upon reception of the white paper, the parliamentary Standing committee responsible for the policy field will prepare a report for a plenary sitting, in which the policy proposals by the ministry are discussed, and recommendations on particular issues are made. Parliament then organizes a plenary debate, after which there is a vote on the recommendations of the standing committee, which is duly entered into the parliamentary protocol. The report by the standing committee and the parliamentary protocol will then be the platform for ministerial policy, which in turn will have to be implemented (or not) by agencies and organizations in the field – in our case mostly HEIs.\(^{12}\)

Now, this is a somewhat complicated and time-consuming procedure. Why go to all this trouble, and involve so many actors?

Regarding the overall rationality of the “committee system,” which only came to be articulated in the administrative policies of the twentieth century, the literature points to two often mentioned aims: 1) to involve lay people (the user perspective) in policymaking, and 2) to involve experts.\(^{13}\) In a complex modern society, politicians and bureaucrats are no longer able to make policies without consulting users and researchers in the field, and even if they were, they could not legitimately do so. The most obvious and most often mentioned reason for this is the existence in society of conflicting interests, and the imperative for politics to find the optimal balance between these in order to secure stable societal functions. This is obviously true, especially with respect to policy issues arising within the economic and political systems, but with systems theory I will argue that in addition to conflicting “interests” there is the issue of incommensurable function system logics to take into consideration (for instance, how to balance the educational system logic – often distilled in the formula of *Bildung* – with the political imperative of socio-economic growth). The differences between the function systems also motivate coupling techniques to be

\(^{11}\) Differences in policymaking procedures between countries are sometimes overlooked because of imprecise translations. For instance, a report by a committee of inquiry is not infrequently translated as a “green paper,” although a “green paper” in the Anglo-American world (and the EU) is produced by the government (or the commission) – and not by an (external) committee. The fact that in all three Scandinavian countries the relevant ministry will handle the publication of the report by a governmentally appointed committee (in Norway and Sweden through series of “Public Reports” – the NOU and SOU, respectively) does not mean that the ministry takes any responsibility for the contents, even as tentative proposals. Because of this difference between committee reports and “green papers,” there are also some subtle differences in political function between a “white paper” in the Anglo-American tradition and e.g. a Norwegian stortingsmelding (literally “report to Parliament”). These differences are not very important in this context however, and I have thus followed the custom of translating stortingsmelding as “white paper” throughout.

\(^{12}\) This summary is derived from the following administrative booklets published by Statens rasjonaliseringsdirektorat: «Søkelyset mot komiteen» (Grundt Tanum, 1959), “Planlegging og utførelse av utredningsarbeid (Statens rasjonaliseringsdirektorat, 1980) and «Fra idé til utredning – en håndbok for oppdragsgiver og utreder» (Aschehoug, 1985).

\(^{13}\) Cf. for instance Moren (1974).
activated. Furthermore, since political organizations (e.g. ministries) are dependent upon non-political organizations like companies, NGOs, hospitals, universities, schools – to actually implement policies, it makes sense to include them in the policymaking process so as to reduce the risk of unpleasant surprises further down the road.

Our issue, however, concerns more specifically the temporary committees of inquiry. What characterizes the appointment and proceedings of such committees? Based on a conceptual framework developed by James D. Thompson and Arthur Tuden, the Norwegian political scientist Jorolf Moren has argued that committees of inquiry are most often used in policymaking when both policy ends and policy means are known to be controversial among interested parties. This in contradistinction to situations where consensus is established regarding ends, but not means (for which an “impartial” expert committee will most likely be used) and situations where means are agreed upon, but where the end-result cannot be calculated (which calls for negotiations in standing committees or councils with carefully balanced interest representation).

So much for the committee system and for temporary committees in general. I now turn to the particular historical material of Norwegian higher education policymaking in the postwar era, which I will in turn compare to the developments in Sweden and Denmark.

**Norwegian committees of inquiry in higher education policymaking**

My focus in the following discussion is five Norwegian committees of inquiry, spanning the period from 1960 to 2008. They are

- The Kleppe committee of 1960-61, which in a brief yet thorough report assessed the sharp increase in demand for higher education in the early sixties, and came up with a concrete and urgent building program for a forceful expansion of the educational capacity of the two existing universities in Norway at the time.
- The Ottosen committee of 1965-70, which in five reports viewed higher education in a wider timeframe and a more comprehensive (systemic) perspective, and came up with extensive reform proposals, including a new university college sector to be built across Norway for provision of shorter and more vocational higher education.
- The Hernes committee of 1987-1988, which sought to counteract the academic drift which by then had come to dominate the university college sector, and to re-establish the functional differentiation between universities and university colleges established by the Ottosen committee by letting the whole tertiary system be supervised by a national council.

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15 There are of course also tactical political reasons for appointing temporal committees of inquiry. It may be used to postpone decisions, to reward persons or organizations with prestigious appointments, etc. While such considerations may of course have played a part in the appointment of the committees I discuss in this paper, it seems highly unlikely that they have been decisive for the repeated use of this policymaking method over a period of half a century.
The Mjøs committee of 1998-2000, which in one massive report proposed a comprehensive reform of Norwegian higher education along the lines of the Bologna reform process.

The Stjernø committee of 2006-08, which proposed a series of mergers which were intended to lead to a new national structure of universities and university colleges.  

It should be noted that, with the exception of the first one, the Kleppe committee, the perspectives and proposals of these committees were never implemented in toto. For various reasons, the political processes following them, with general hearings and parliamentary debates, trimmed them down. The most recent committee report, by the Stjernø committee, could even be said to have been put in the drawer by the government then in office. Moreover, it should also be remembered that in addition to these committees there has been throughout these fifty years a continuous communication between governmental organizations (mostly the ministry of education) and HEIs (and their organizations), and countless incremental changes in policies and practices have been made. There is reason, therefore, to be skeptical of the view of Kleppe, Ottosen, and the rest of these committees as the sovereign architects or master builders of Norwegian higher education.

Nevertheless, whenever the history of Norwegian higher education is narrated, it is to these committees of inquiry researchers turn for agency, rather than to ministers of education, or to university rectors. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, the committees of inquiry were meant to be important by the governments which appointed them. Except perhaps for the first one, the Kleppe committee, they were mandated to take a comprehensive view of Norwegian higher education, and to concern themselves with basic, structural issues: internal governance of individual HEIs, inter-organizational structure of the HEIs, coordination between the higher education system and the political system, as well as the structural aspects of education (admissions, degree structure, course and credit system, etc.). However, an unspoken rule has been to keep an arm's length distance from curricular and pedagogical matters.

Secondly, all the committees except the last one have managed to stand united behind their major proposals. Thirdly, the committees have managed to keep their proposals within the limits of the politically feasible – again, with the apparent exception of the last one. And as a fourth point I might add that in Norway there has not been major disagreements between political parties regarding higher education policy, despite some inevitable combative rhetoric to the contrary, particularly in election years. For the most part, social democratic and conservative parties have implemented each other’s reforms – prepared by the mentioned committees – with relatively minor revisions. Even during the eight years from 2005 to 2013, when the socialist party had the minister, following a minister from the conservative party, there was no major departure from this line of continuity.

We see, then, that there is a great deal of consistency and historical continuity in the Norwegian use of temporary committees of inquiry for policymaking in the field of higher education. But there have also been significant changes. Membership, for instance, has changed. And there have been changes in how policymaking and political “planning” has been understood, and therefore also in the role assigned to temporary committees of inquiry.

16 In this list I have not included a few expert committees whose mandates have been restricted to the preparation of new legislation.
Membership in the Norwegian committees

Let us have a look at membership first:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NORWAY</th>
<th>Politics</th>
<th>Academia</th>
<th>Working life</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Kleppe committee (60-61)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The Ottosen committee (65-70)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The Hernes committee (87-88)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The Mjøs committee (98-00)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Stjernø committee (06-08)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
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</table>

There are many difficulties with categorizing committee members, and in the table presented here I have conflated a lot of distinctions which may be of considerable interest in other contexts: between politicians and bureaucrats, between academics from various institutions and disciplines, between professors and students, and even between employers and employees. However, as my primary interest here lies, as previously stated, with the structural coupling between various function systems, categorization is made on that basis (with the two function systems of education and research grouped together as “academia”, reflecting their organizational coupling in universities and university colleges). A further complication obviously arises from the fact that many of the committee members have had affiliations with several organizations, and have had different roles in their careers, professionally or otherwise – either simultaneously or successively. But on the basis of the tables above we can offer the following general comments on membership in the various committees:

The Kleppe committee was exceptionally dominated by the domain of politics – although two out of four members (Eide and Ottosen) might be said to have intimate knowledge of Norwegian higher education.17

The Ottosen committee was more evenly balanced between politics and academia.

The Hernes committee was on the face of it completely dominated by academia, but because many of the academics also had political affiliations and experience, it was more “balanced” in that respect than may appear. Here we also note that the level of representation from “working life” has been increased, a level which was to be maintained subsequently.

The Mjøs committee, by far the largest of the five, was even more dominated by academia, with a great variety of different HEIs, disciplines, and student groups represented.

The Stjernø committee was, like the two previous ones dominated by academics, although its leader, a professor and former rector at a university college, was an active member of the Socialist Party, which then had the Minister of education.

17 Eide wore several hats. He had since the early 1950s represented the interests of Norwegian research in The joint committee of research councils, and was also an influential figure in the social democratic party.
The most remarkable historical trends, then, seem to be the shift from political to academic dominance, and the introduction of representation from “working life”. On the face of it, the explanation for the withdrawal of the political system from direct representation in these committees is simple. In the early 1970s there was a change in the guidelines for public administration, and the new guidelines advised strongly against MPs and other politicians being appointed as members to policymaking committees, and also against bureaucrats being used other than in the “neutral” position of secretary, for the seemingly simple reason that politicians and bureaucrats should not bind themselves to particular views on issues which either Parliament or an executive branch would have to make a decision on further down the road. As it was presented, and even as it appears to legally minded observers today, this was a change which seems almost to have been deduced from the axioms of parliamentarism. But viewed historically and in a comparative perspective, it was surely contingent upon a broader change in the view of policymaking which may tell us interesting things about how and why Norwegian higher education changed the way it did. This change may also provide an explanation for the repeated appointment of representatives from “working life” in committees after 1970. To understand why and how this change came about, we need to look closer at policymaking in the period prior to 1970, and to compare it with the developments in Sweden and Denmark.

Committees and policymaking in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark prior to 1970

As previously noted, the joint and in many ways interconnected work of the Kleppe and Ottosen committees of the 1960s more or less established the two-track, massified higher education system in Norway, a system which persisted throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The existing institutions (two universities and a handful of polytechnics and colleges) were expanded with new campuses; a new category of vocational higher education was introduced; new regionally based institutions were founded; the principles for admissions and capacity building were established; the hierarchy of overall goals as well as organizational matters were discussed; and perhaps most importantly, higher education was institutionalized as a societal sector and a policy field of its own – it was no longer just an odd collection of small but prestigious individual institutions. I cannot go further into the details of the policy content of the proposals made by the two committees of this establishing phase, but today it seems almost incredible that so dramatic changes could have been prepared by two small groups of men (they were all men), and then implemented in a relatively short time, in spite of some loud but ineffective protests in conjunction with the student uprisings. It is the higher education system established in this period which later committees have had to take as their starting point – whether to preserve it or reform it. Despite some new names and added features here and there, the basic contours of this structure are still clearly visible today.

How does this historical trajectory compare to the developments in Sweden and Denmark, two countries which viewed in a global perspective are very similar to Norway? Both countries had made use of temporary committees of inquiry in the field of higher education in the fifties, but in different ways, and with very different results. In Sweden the so-called University commission of 1955, a small group of academics and bureaucrats, chaired at first by a politician, but soon taken over by the rector at Uppsala, Torgny Segerstedt, published seven reports between 1955 and 1963, which were to set a standard for such committees not only in Scandinavia, but throughout Europe. For instance, it was widely quoted in the later

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and much more famous Robbins report in the U.K. Its proposals amounted to a drastic expansion and transformation of Swedish higher education, and most of it was actually implemented. That it gathered political support is perhaps not so strange when we consider that the first chairman of the commission had to step down to take office as minister of education in the long standing social democratic government. But that it managed to have its analyses and rather drastic actions accepted, or at least tolerated, by the world of academia at the same time is quite unique. In hindsight the 1955 Commission is often credited for actually having been able to foresee and prepare for the massification which engulfed higher education in the 1960s (although of course for some critical historians it represents the peak of gouvernementalité). 19

In Denmark, experiences with committees of this kind in academic matters were very different. In the postwar era, several large committees (upwards of 15 people, almost all of them professors) had failed to come up with viable proposals regarding issues such as research funding and reform of the degree structure in higher education, and in the mid-sixties another such large committee provoked quite some resentment in political circles by effectively vetoing a proposal for the establishment of a directorate for higher education. Although never openly confrontational, the period can be described as an unproductive standoff between what Burton Clark called “the academic oligarchy” and a relatively weak ministry of education. 20 The only committees which made policies that were actually implemented in this period were two building committees appointed in the late 1950s when it had become evident that educational capacity had to be increased to cope with the growing student numbers. These committees had more representation from the political administration, including the ministry of finance, and significantly fewer professors. And the universities were indeed expanded around 1960, but very little was done with structural matters, except adding a new university. Qualitative issues were not touched upon at all. 21

If we were to make a “Whig history” comparison between the three Scandinavian countries regarding policymaking in the field of higher education in the mid-60s, one would have to say that Sweden had almost effortlessly gotten far ahead, whereas Danish reform efforts had been mostly vetoed by academia. Norway was late to join the game, but the two 1960s committees were jointly aiming to emulate the Swedish success story.

What mostly interests me here, however, is that from the last half of the 60s, policymaking in Sweden and Denmark took another turn than in Norway. In both countries permanent bodies for policymaking in the field of higher education were established around this time. In Sweden this measure was based on a thoroughly argued proposal from the 1955 University Commission, and the result was the establishment in 1964 of the University Chancellor’s Agency, charged with the task of being, in the words of the Minister of education (the one who had previously chaired the 1955 University Commission) “a permanent committee of inquiry” for higher education. 22

In Denmark, the committee which had managed to fend off the idea of a directorate had instead proposed a permanent council dominated by academics for the planning of higher education. And such a council

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19 A useful summary of this phase in Swedish higher education policymaking can be found in Nevéus (1976).
21 The postwar period in Denmark is analyzed in Christensen (1982) and Hansen (2008).
22 Nevéus (1976) p. 29.
was indeed established in 1965, and for some years thereafter it had the responsibility for policymaking in the field. But then, after a turbulent period around 1970, during which the academic oligarchy had been toppled by an unlikely alliance between the political system and student protesters, a new committee on the organization of the public sector with members from the ministries of education and finance rather briskly proposed and then had established precisely such a directorate as had previously been turned down by the academic world. Danish historians and social scientists seem to agree that this reorganization drastically altered the relationship between the ministry of education, which through its directorate could now view Danish higher education as one object of political planning, and the universities and colleges, which were now no longer in a position to dictate the terms of the future developments

In Norway no such permanent body was established – not until much later, and then in a changed context. But the idea was certainly considered. It is almost never mentioned in historical accounts, where most of the interest concerns the temporary committees we have mentioned, but the idea of a permanent council for higher education, or some other such permanent body, was actually debated time and again for more than twenty years, before a council was finally established in the mid-90s, only to be discontinued after a few years.

With regards to the issue of “functional equivalents” mentioned in my introduction, and the methodological strategy of explaining the use of one method of policymaking with comparative reference to other possible methods, it is an interesting question why no such permanent council was established in Norway in this period.

The idea of a permanent council for higher education in Norway

The Ottosen committee had underscored, in the final chapter of its final report, that “it is no longer possible to fulfill important functions such as analyses and planning mainly through temporary committees of inquiry.” However, it did not propose the establishment of a permanent body like in Sweden and Denmark, which the committee was familiar with through Nordic administrative cooperation, but a “strengthening of the existing structure” – without further specification. In the White Paper which followed it, however, the ministry discussed the establishment of a permanent body – in the form of a council – based on a proposal from another committee dealing with the organization of public administration in general – much like in Denmark. Although no concrete proposal was made – the matter was to be the subject of “further consideration” – the general idea of a national council was supported by a majority in the ensuing parliamentary vote. But then the idea got stranded. Part of the reason for this was that the two major actors, the ministry and the academic institutions could not agree on the balance of representation.

23 Christensen (1982) concludes quite simply that with the establishment of this directorate, “the extensive autonomy of the institutions was impaired” (p. 259).
25 Cf. the two white papers St. meld. Nr. 66 (1972-73) and St. meld. Nr 16 (1974-75). The first one was prepared by a Conservative government, and later withdrawn when a Labor government took office. It was then replaced by the latter one. The proposal of a national council gets more attention and is more accentuated in the latter white paper.
The universities and some of the largest university colleges had since the mid-1950s held a yearly Rectors’ Conference. This forum had not been very effective, though. For instance, it had not been able to make a joint statement on the important reports by the Ottosen committee. An initiative had therefore been made in the late 60s to formalize this body and to include more of the university colleges. Slowly, the academic world was getting organized, and it was in the middle of this process the idea of a permanent council came up.

The ministry was still small, although it was growing (it had since 1965 been supplemented with a planning department). It put great emphasis, therefore, on being in charge of appointments to the proposed council, and underscored in the white paper that it would also appoint “representatives from society outside the higher education institutions.” The Rectors conference strongly resisted this, a resistance which contributed to the proposal of the ministry eventually being voted down in Parliament. The Rectors’ conference instead came up with a proposal to reorganize itself, and in reorganized form (but still with representatives only from the higher education institutions and a few from the ministry) act as a national council with a governmental charter. This was in turn rejected by the ministry.

The outcome was that the Rectors’ Conference turned itself into a separate, non-governmental organization, named the Council for Norwegian Universities and University Colleges, an organization which is still extant today under a slightly changed name. The idea of a national council formally affiliated with the ministry was raised again in the early 80s, and there was even a subsequent parliamentary decision to establish it, but it was endlessly postponed, and only came to be realized in 1995, as the result of a new committee of inquiry, the Hernes committee, only to be discontinued a few years later, when the Bologna process had been set in motion, and policy techniques like accreditation, incentive schemes, etc. directed at individual institutions largely replaced concerns for national coordination and planning.

If we disregard for a moment the historical nitty-gritty of this development, and try to look at the bigger picture, why was the establishment of a permanent council in Norway so difficult when there seems to have been a general agreement about the necessity of national coordination as well as more continuous analyses – in the Ottosen committee, the ministry, the Rectors’ Conference (and hence the institutions), and also in Parliament? Both Sweden and Denmark had established such bodies, which usually makes quite an impression on Norwegians. I will propose two possible answers to this question.

The first has to do with representation, autonomy, and balance between system logics, as is clearly visible in the trajectory we have traced above. Simply put, the HEIs were afraid the balance would be shifted in their disfavor if they accepted a permanent body with substantial representation not only by the ministry (whom they had grown accustomed to dealing with) but also with “representatives from society outside the higher education institutions” – i.e. from trade unions, employer’s organizations, or perhaps other organized interests.27 This was not an entirely unreasonable fear. Reading the policy documents today it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that at least one motive behind the proposal of a national council for higher education was that the ministry, at this time run by a labor party minister, wanted to curb the professional power of the professors, and the institutional dominance of the HEIs, particularly the universities – a position and an authority which in the view of the ministry they did not have the administrative capacity or

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the broader societal outlook to handle at a political level, at least not when expenditures had gotten so high. And of course it is a well-established method used by governmental agencies in corporative settings to introduce a “third party” – often the social partners – to avoid heads-on confrontations with a “difficult” organized interest, for instance a professional group.\footnote{In Norway, this has contributed to the representation of the major trade union (LO) in innumerable committees and boards far beyond their core policy areas. Cf. Nordby (1994).}

But if there was such an intent, which seems to have been political rather than bureaucratic, and if the Norwegian ministry could not persuade the academic organizations to accept a permanent body for higher education like the Swedish ministry had done, why did they not simply force it through against their will like the Danish ministry did at about the same time? Partly, I would argue, because in Norway, unlike in Denmark, the rectors could count on support from the students on this issue, and in the mid-1970s the political establishment certainly did not want to provoke new student protests. But perhaps more importantly because influential forces within the ministry, especially in the bureaucracy, does not seem to have been very enthusiastic about the plans for a new council. And this leads me to an issue I have alluded to above, namely changes in the ideas about political planning and public administration.

### Planning

The most important task for a permanent national body with responsibility for higher education would be planning. But how was planning perceived in the period in question? A periodization made by the Danish political scientist Niels Åkerstrøm Andersen may be of some help in this regard. Andersen has argued that public administration in Denmark went through a “planning” phase from 1960 until 1980 in which socioeconomic growth was sought through sectorial planning centered around the political system, but that this was replaced around 1980 by a “polycentric” phase, which is still ongoing, in which central planning is more or less given up and political, administrative, as well as other publicly owned organizations are conceded (or burdened with) autonomy in order to be able to adapt, as best they can, to their societal environment.\footnote{Cf. Niels Åkerstrøm Andersen (1995).}

If we measure the development of Norwegian public administration in this period against Andersen’s schema, we can, in my view, recognize the same shift. But in Norway (and in Sweden too, actually) the planning phase started earlier, in the late forties, and wore off earlier too (which it does not seem to have done in Sweden, however). At least in the policy field of higher education I would argue that the idea of central planning was seriously questioned already in the mid-60s in Norway, shortly after a planning department was established in the ministry of education. This department, led by a top civil servant, Kjell Eide, who was also a central member of the Ottosen committee, soon realized that “planning,” at least in the field of higher education, could not be conducted in a top-down manner, with the planning department giving orders to the department holding budgetary responsibility for universities, which would then forward these to the universities. Instead, the planning department developed what Eide has called a “pedagogical” style in its relations with its environment – both internally in the political and administrative system, and in
relation to for instance academic organizations. This corresponds as far as I can see loosely to what Andersen calls “polycentrism” in which long as well as short term planning is conceived as an ongoing evolutionary process of adaptation and the responsibility to change needs to lie with the organizations which actually perform the changes (which presupposes that they are equipped with the capacity and sense of responsibility to actually implement the changes). In exceptional cases there can be external “steering” (or at least drastic reductions of available options), but as a rule the autonomy of all parties involved needs to be respected.

One would perhaps think this change in the ideas about planning increased the probability of the establishment of a permanent corporative body, since on the face of it this would involve equal and autonomous actors in the same policymaking forum – on a level playing field, so to speak. But as we have seen, the ministry was wary of academic dominance, and wanted to be able to use a “third party” to even things out. And the Rectors’ conference was likewise afraid of ending up in a minority position in a permanent body. It seems then that while both the political and academic organizations were in the process of gaining what Andersen refers to as second-order autonomy – i.e. not only self-awareness and the ability to react to stimuli from the environment, but also the ability to proactively plan its future states – they were still too unstable to take the risk of cooptation in continuous contact with other system logics in a new organization – which is what a new council would amount to. As is well known from organizational studies, this is fairly normal: established organizations will view the establishment of new ones on their own turf with skepticism, and if unable to dictate or at least influence the conditions, will be adverse to it.

Let me now try to sum up my comparison of these mechanisms for structural coupling between politics and higher education, nationally as well as functionally. In Sweden it seems the political system in the 1960s was so dominant that it did not even occur to the world of academia to question the establishment of the Chancellor’s agency, which was effectively a governmental planning agency with some academic representation. Protests came only later, when a reform planned by this agency (the UKAS reform proposal) became the target of student protests. In Denmark the universities and the academic profession held a much stronger position, and were at first able to veto a directorate. But precisely this demonstration of professional strength seems to have made it imperative for the political system to get a grip on the situation. A directorate was precisely what it needed to do this. In Norway, however, the relation between the political and the academic worlds was much more balanced around 1970. Neither side was able (or willing) to compromise their own autonomy, or to seriously challenge the autonomy of the other.

As mentioned, the reluctance of the Norwegian ministry to dictate the conditions for the establishment of a new corporate body resulted at least in part from a conception of planning which differed from that in Sweden and Denmark, where permanent bodies were established to provide sectorial planning in Andersen’s sense. An additional explanatory factor is that in both Sweden and Denmark there were historical precedents for such bodies. In Sweden the office of University Chancellor was had served for centuries as the governmental representative in the administrations of the universities of Lund and

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30 The theory of planning which guided work in the planning department in the ministry of education is outlined in Eide (1973). A vivid and personal account of the history of the ministry of education in the 60s and 70s can be found in Eide (1985). Cf. also Eide (1995). A more general account of changes in the ideas about planning in Norway in the late 60s and early 70s can be found in Østerud (1979).
Uppsala, and in Denmark the old University of Copenhagen had always had a governmental representative in the office of the University Curator. In Norway, however, the office of University Chancellor had been abolished in the mid-19th century as part of the struggle for national independence, and the University of Oslo and other Norwegian HEIs had since operated at quite some distance from the political system. To the Norwegian Rector’s Conference, therefore, the establishment of a national body or council at the intersection of politics and higher education therefore seemed odd and unnecessary.

Conclusions

From these reflections on the negative question about why no permanent body for coupling between politics and higher education was established in Norway in the 60s and 70s, I will now return, by way of conclusion, to the issue of temporary committees of inquiry. Can we conclude that Norway has grown dependent upon policymaking in temporary committees of inquiry because the functional equivalent, a permanent council, proved impossible to establish in the formative years of the Norwegian structures? I believe this is part of the explanation, but we must consider the positive side of the issue too. The use of temporary committees has several advantages over a permanent structural coupling like a council or a directorate, as seen from the perspective of the various actors.

As Anders Esmark has argued, a temporary committee of inquiry is not an organization but rather falls under the systems theoretical concept of an “interaction system” – i.e. its members interact in mutual observation of each other, rather than according to formal procedural rules, and although it produces a report, this does not have the character of a decision, but of a provisional proposal, with the option of dissenting comments, or even of withdrawing from the committee. These characteristics, Esmark argues, makes such a policymaking network much less threatening to existing organizations – political as well as academic – than establishing a new organization.31

We noted that committees since 1970 have been dominated by academics, with some representation of other organized interests. No doubt this has strengthened the legitimacy of these committees in the academic world. But it would be wrong to conclude that withdrawing from active participation has correspondingly weakened the political system in general and the ministry of education in particular. As we saw above, the work of a temporary committee is only one part of this method of policymaking, and the ministry as well as the Cabinet and Parliament has many ways of influencing the outcome. Also, placing the structural coupling at an arm’s length distance from the political organizations means that the political risk becomes easier to control. If a temporary committee comes up with proposals which are deemed politically unusable, blame may be put – more or less subtly – on the committee, or matters may be infinitely postponed with use of the magical phrase “further consideration”. Direct engagement with the world of academia in a permanent policymaking body would perhaps result over time in better mutual adaption, but at higher risks – falling out would be more likely, and because of representativeness the consequences would more difficult to handle.

This is not to say that the dependence on temporary committees has been beneficial for Norwegian higher education or for the political system in Norway. In the 1970s and 1980s the HEIs were mostly left to their

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31 Esmark (2009).
own devices, with poor results. The background for appointing a new committee of inquiry in the late 1980s, the Hernes committee, was a grave concern for the low quality of Norwegian higher education and research. The major perspectives and proposals of the Hernes committee could not do much to counteract this, however, and its attempt to curtail the academic drift of the university colleges was also a failure. The next committee, appointed after a new surge in student numbers in the 1990s was more successful, in the sense that its proposals were actually implemented, but it is doubtful whether this would have been possible without the support of the Bologna process. Perhaps the real weaknesses of policymaking by temporary committees of inquiry became evident in the aftermath of the recent Stjernø committee. While it is certainly too early to pass judgment on the policy perspectives and the various proposals of this committee, it seems clear from the outcome so far that although all parties realize that the current situation calls for quite substantial and comprehensive action, there is seemingly a wide gulf which separates the individual HEIs and the various academic organizations, the ministry, and other organized interests with a stake in education and research as regards acceptable policies. Most fundamentally, there is no agreement about whether the 35 state owned universities and university colleges should form a coherent system, or are competitors in a zero-sum game. I cannot go into the details of this debate here, but the distance that has been allowed to grow between the various stakeholders now seems to be too great for a temporary committee of inquiry to bridge.

Perhaps if we are to draw a tentative general conclusion from these Scandinavian historical experiences, it will have to do with the central importance of time in structural coupling between autonomous but also interdependent systems – and in particular of continuity versus dependence on single events. Whereas the relatively short duration and temporary nature of a committee of inquiry makes it an attractive policymaking method from the point of view of each of the implied organizations at any single point in time, the risk is as we have seen that, over longer periods of time, the internal dynamics of each of the systems involved will propel them too far apart. Maybe an exposure to prolonged and incremental mutual adjustment at the structural level – even if it hurts (Luhmann speaks of such processes as “irritation”) – is preferable in the long run, but the paradox is of course that such a longtime perspective on the structural issues of higher education, which could perhaps motivate a more enduring structural coupling mechanism, is not easily obtainable before such a coupling mechanism is actually established.
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