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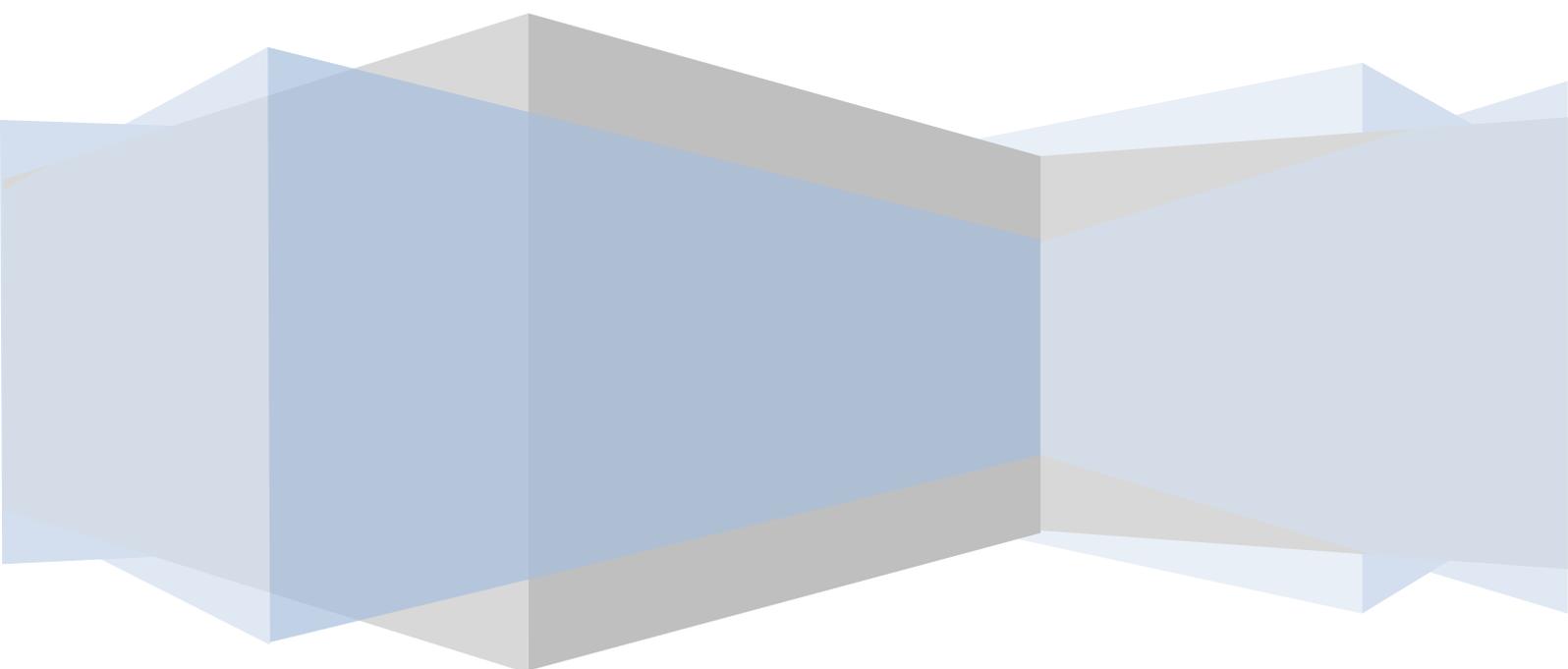
**Pre-project: HIGHER EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING: THE
EFFECTS OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION**

Introduction: Beyond reform – investigating the intangible factors influencing change in higher education

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Introduction

The general aim of this pre-project for Utdanning 2020 has been to provide two state-of-the-art review reports on:

- The 'Europe of Knowledge' (European Integration and Higher Education).
- Changing Cultures of Knowledge and Learning in Higher Education ('Professional Learning and Higher Education')

The produced review reports are published separately on the website of the research group HEIK¹, which is the academic home of the pre-project, and most of the researchers involved in the reviews.

The two reviews demonstrate that research on higher education is "expanding" –in the theoretical as well as the empirical scope. Theoretically, the reviews show a research field where new perspectives and disciplinary approaches have entered into an already fragmented landscape signaling the need to build bridges between the various theories, concepts and perspectives used. Further, the reviews indicate that to understand how higher education is changing, we need to broaden our empirical lenses to capture how new arenas influence and interact in the changing of the sector.

In this brief introduction, we want to draw attention to the relevance of the pre-project for future research in higher education. This will be done in three steps. First, we briefly sketch the background for the two reviews and the research field in question. Second, we will present the first contours of a joint research agenda by discussing two underlying theoretical views of relevance for understanding and explaining the change processes higher education is undergoing. Third, we will present a note for future research. By doing so we will give an example of the conceptual and empirical bridges that the researchers involved in the pre-project are building in their efforts to strengthen the field of higher education research, and integrate the two research strands they cover. This 'bridging' exercise will be continued in the production of a number of research proposals in 2011, for the Utdanning 2020 programme, as well as for other research programmes.

¹ The research group HEIK (Higher Education: Institutional dynamics and Knowledge cultures) was set up by the Faculty of Education, UiO, at 1 January 2011. (See: <http://www.uv.uio.no/forskning/grupper/heik/index.html>)

Background

In recent decades higher education studies has emerged as an increasingly visible, interdisciplinary field of research across the social sciences. However, in educational research the engagement of researchers in higher education studies has traditionally been quite fragmented. On the one hand, research that addresses questions of teaching and learning in higher education institutions has often been carried out within the frames of the pedagogical practice itself and thus was losing sight of how core aspects of teaching and learning are constituted by wider institutional and cultural processes. On the other hand, research on the governance and organisation of higher education has predominantly addressed these topics on (inter)national and institutional levels, and thus not investigated empirically how these processes play out differently in different academic communities and how they interplay with epistemic processes in constituting the 'inner life' of higher education institutions.

This review report and the involved researchers want to contribute to filling this gap through bringing together two research teams – and their specific research perspectives – that are well positioned in international research. One team led by Professors Åse Gornitzka (Arena, UiO) and Peter Maassen (Department of Educational Research, UiO) that primarily has been concerned with how the change dynamics of higher education institutions is affected by national and international, mainly European-level governance approaches and policies; and one team led by Professors Karen Jensen and Monika Nerland (Department of Educational Research, UiO) that has primarily has been concerned with knowledge cultures in higher education and work, with a special focus on professional education and learning.

Through bringing these two perspectives together a central aim for this pre-project is to strengthen our knowledge base and enhance our theoretical, methodological, and empirical understanding of the dynamics of higher education and its way of fostering academic and professional development. This implies that the researchers involved through the review report aim at contributing to an improved understanding of the transformation of higher education as an enduring institution in the context of changing national socio-economic and political processes, efforts to build a "Europe of knowledge", and the impact of knowledge cultures on learning in higher education. The road ahead as stipulated in the reviews, consists of a focus on the effects of this transformation on the governance and organisation of higher education, on teaching and learning processes in higher education institutions, on leadership and management structures in higher education institutions, on the role of universities and colleges in organizing, producing, safeguarding and warranting knowledge and competencies, and on the way in which changes in the interactions between higher education, working life and professional associations affect teaching and learning in HEIs as well as professional learning.

Research focus and relevant theoretical perspectives

A shared interest of the researchers involved concerns the aim to conceptualize and empirically investigate dynamics of change in higher education and their implications for the activities of academics and students in educational programs. This implies contributing to an improved

understanding of the transformation of higher education as an enduring but changing institution in the context of a) changing societal and political processes that influence the governance, organization and institutional dynamics of higher education, including the learning environments in universities and colleges, and b) changes in the epistemic cultures and processes that constitute academic communities, their logics and their boundaries. By bringing these societal, political and epistemic processes together, the review reports present an overview of the state of the art in research that examines the conditions for academic and professional development in higher education today, and the role of universities and colleges in producing and warranting knowledge and competencies for a complex and changing knowledge-based society. Below we will explicate core issues in the two main perspectives that constitute the research agenda, as elaborated in the two review reports.

Institutional dynamics

This tradition in higher education studies takes as a point of departure that higher education belongs to the core institutions of modern societies, in terms of continuity as well as change. Historically, the development of the university as a specialized institution dedicated to specific purposes and principles was part of the large-scale transformation from pre-modern to modern societies in Europe. Institutional differentiation created interdependent but partly autonomous institutional spheres of thought and action based on different logics, norms and values, principles of organization and governance, resources, and dynamics, such as democratic politics, market economy, religion, science, art, and civil society (Olsen 2007). In some periods institutional spheres are in balance, but at transformative points in history institutions can also come in direct competition.

In constitutional democracies higher education is functionally dependent on, but partially autonomous from other institutions. However, collisions between key institutions are an important source of change and radical transformation of one institution is usually linked to changes in other institutions. As a consequence, there is a need to clarify the conditions under which institutional change, including changes in learning environments, is a fairly autonomous (internal) process, and the conditions under which internal processes are overwhelmed by wider external forces. We need to distinguish between, on the one hand, incremental change and reforms within fairly stable organizational and normative frames and, on the other hand, change and reforms where the legitimacy of higher education's mission, organization, functioning, moral foundation, ways of thought and resources are doubted and challenged.

Institutional imperialism may threaten to destroy what is distinct about other institutional spheres. However, institutional defense against invasion of alien norms has to be taken into account, and the strength of the institutional defense powers in universities can explain their persistent existence and survival also in period of institutional attack.

Universities are still the main institutions through which accumulated knowledge on advanced levels is produced. As such they are argued to be more important as institutions than as organisations (Meyer et al. 2007), implying that the university's role in the installation of knowledge, amongst other things, through specialized, high level teaching and training programmes, is less important than

its role as knowledge producer. Consequently, a core part of our multidisciplinary research focus in this perspective concerns the relationships of changes in the institutional dynamics of higher education systems, incl. higher education governance changes, with changes in academic learning, teaching, learning environments, and practices, as well as the effects on them of contextual innovations such as the introduction of qualifications frameworks at the European and national levels.

Knowledge cultures and their influence on academic and professional learning

This research tradition highlights the epistemic dimensions of academic cultures and practices in higher education and the ways in which individuals become enrolled in and develop capacities for skilful participation in specialized cultures within and beyond the context of higher education institutions. Disciplinary knowledge cultures in higher education have previously been researched and described in classical studies like Becher and Trowler's "Academic tribes and territories" (1989/2001) and in adherent research by e.g. Becher (1984) and Neumann et al (2002). In this research disciplinary knowledge cultures are understood as discipline-specific cultures marked by historical accumulation, a high degree of specialization, and distinct institutional community features. However, today the role and character of disciplinary cultures are in transition, as are the boundaries of their communities. The shifts are related to changes in relations between the local and the global, between the 'academic' and the 'professional' as well as in knowledge itself. First, while academic disciplines traditionally have crossed institutional and national borders and formed communities on the international scene, the more recent emergence of networks and technological infrastructures provide new opportunities for participation and mobility. Knowledge flows and spreads rapidly in information networks, people participate in networks of social relations that extend far beyond their local physical site, and articulations of global processes are continually recontextualized and enacted in local settings. Second, the boundaries between academic and professional programmes are blurred, in the sense that academic study programmes are getting more oriented towards work and the professional programmes are subjected to processes of academisation. Third, traditional boundaries between areas of knowledge production and application are blurred, leading to a hybridization of forms of knowledge and their related agencies.

These developments create new conditions for learning and community alignment in higher education, and may serve to alter roles and responsibilities among teachers and students. Thus an important research focus in this research strand is to investigate the interplay between transnational epistemic cultures and the efforts of students and academics in higher education practices. Moreover, to understand academic practices within higher education it is necessary to take into account how these practices interrelate with the 'outside' world. As described by Nespors (1994) students may simultaneously interact with people and resources in the immediate environment and with people and resources spatially and temporally removed from us. This engagement is nevertheless premised and made possible by means of practical arrangements in the local academic or professional community. As Nespors states, "Communities aren't just situated in space and time, they are ways of producing and organizing space and time and setting up patterns of movement across space and time" (p. 9). Thus, we need to investigate these processes from 'above' and from

'below' simultaneously, in order to grasp how transnational knowledge cultures become localized and how local communities organize opportunities for participation in wider knowledge communities.

To further examine these issues, the research in this strand draws, amongst others, on the perspectives of Karin Knorr Cetina on epistemic cultures and practices, which is further developed in the Faculty of Education within the projects ProLEARN and LIKE. By drawing on these perspectives, research within this strand aims to investigate: How knowledge is produced, circulated and warranted in different knowledge cultures in higher education, and how academics and students are involved in and informed by these processes. One aspect of this is to reveal differences between more professional and more academic cultures in higher education programmes, to revisit and eventually contribute to a more timely description than the dominating disciplinary approach provided by Becher et al. Another aspect is to reveal how knowledge communities are constituted in interplay between local and global processes.

Mechanisms of enrolment into these cultures as well as pathways of participation over time: This aspect concerns how students are mobilized to become skilful participants in knowledge cultures, by way of the specific socio-material arrangements of knowledge in educational programmes. It also concerns how students and staff develop shared 'epistementalities' to act as members of these cultures, during education and as they enter working life

Bridging perspectives in the study of higher education and related knowledge cultures

As highlighted in both reviews, the current situation is characterized by a very divergent theoretical mosaic of approaches. Within what broadly may be defined as studies in the "higher education and related knowledge cultures" we find traditional pedagogical research emphasizing "learning", more sociological traditions emphasizing "socialization" and "cultural manifestation", and political scientists interested in "institutionalization" and "coordination" – just to mention a few. The whole field is also disintegrated by the fact that the empirical focus often varies. While some researchers are interested in teaching and learning per se, others are more interested in governance arrangements and the interplay between policy formulation and policy outcome, while yet others are more focused on how epistemic cultures are created in specific research fields and disciplines.

While a number of insights and much valuable research can be identified within these traditions and perspectives, we would still argue that our two reviews show the need to link perspectives if we are to develop research that fits the changing higher education landscape. As illustrated in our reviews, we can no longer operate with simple linear change models. If the formation of higher education nowadays best can be understood as a process of "mutual transformation" we consequently need to go "upwards" and "downwards" simultaneously to account for both stability and the dynamics of the system.

What we have learned from the two literature reviews is how higher education proceeds disorderly towards a situation where higher education institutions act and interact within meshed and complex orders. A particular striking aspect of institution building and Europeanisation is how integration may

take place without the resort to hard law and funding of higher education. Europeanisation proceeds here through the pathways to common European standards and voluntariness. To illustrate the referred to bridging activities between the two research strands we will raise here a set of issues that we deem as particularly theoretically promising and practically relevant for the common research agenda on the transformation of higher education.

The growing use of standards in higher education

Standards can be seen as a form of regulation that produces order as an alternative or supplement to hierarchies and market coordination (Brunsson and Jacobsson 2000). Standards are particularly amenable in areas of social interaction where states or other sub-national actors have regulatory autonomy (Kerwer 2005) as is the case with respect to higher education. Here it is of interest to look at how European standards are formulated, how they function across levels of governance, and across diverse national and institutional settings. Standards are certainly not a new invention in the higher education sector, with its auditing and accreditation structures and procedures. Peer review and collegial control according to academic standards and the assessment of quality have been an integral part of the research and teaching and learning process.

However, the element that separates the latest developments from the institutional traditions in higher education is that standards (especially in the area of quality assurance) have been formalized and moved out of the academic arena into an administrative or political-administrative sphere. National agencies organise the production and use of standards of assessment and accreditation. Such standards are being defined in interactions across levels of governance and the development of a European level of governance, including its organisation and means of coordination. Few other areas are able to demonstrate so amply how European cooperation in interaction with other international developments affects how control over knowledge is being exercised.

There is a strong European element to the rise and spread of quality assurance regimes that has been firmly put on the agenda by the Bologna Process. Yet there are domain contestations as to what arenas and what standard sets should become institutionalized and what kinds of organisational solutions to setting and using quality assessment standards should be supported. For example, the proposal of the European Commission to develop institutional arrangements at a European level in the area of quality assessment, assurance and certification has not been accepted – instead the embryonic compromise is the network of national agencies and a register of accreditation agencies organised at the European level. The development and use of quality assessment standards in Europe is thus a potentially rich case for studying the linkages of various actors, i.e. national governments, national agencies, private agencies, universities and academic associations, educational experts, and transnational and international organisations that are involved in the development of such standards. This includes the relative impact of European standards and the issue how standards become effective.

Very little is known about how such standards are dealt with at different levels of governance and among different actors in the university sector, and also what national or institutional conditions work as filters for or insulation against the penetration of European standards on local practices. There is very little systematic investigation of whether the growing volume of European standards

promulgated with intensity at European arenas can best be seen as symbolic standards affirming European common values and ideas, as European or national policy instruments for auditing and oversight, or as standards developed as market information to make cross border and cross systemic interaction possible. This means primarily that the role of standards has to be investigated in the context of the use and development of standards nationally, especially at the level of national agencies. The three step analytical framework discussed in parts of this report has potential for investigating these dynamics. National and European standards could be developed parallel with each other where the latter amplifies the former, or it could be that European standards come in addition to national ones or that national regulation produces a “double whammy” of formalized rules (Hood et al. 2004: 16). If European standards are directly presented to higher education institutions, as in case of market information standards, then we expect new standardized rules without the reduction of state rules. When European standards hit higher education institutions via the changes in the national sets of rules, then such a double whammy pattern does not necessarily follow, as might be expected in academic staff issues. On the other hand, European standards might represent a formalization of control of academic practices, as is likely in the case of quality assurance and accreditation.

Similarly *quantified standards* are being developed and used as an alternative to hard law. These are fashioned as systemic performance indicators. In terms of ideational based control, indicators are significant because they black-box certain world views. Once a statistical category is established, the priority given to longitudinal comparison makes them hard to change. We can assume that such quantified standards play varying roles in multi-level governance. At the European level such numerical information is important in a dual function. According to a naming-shaming logic, national governments and their national system will accelerate their efforts to conform to common goals through reputational control. On the other hand numerical standards mobilize bias (Sverdrup 2006: 105) and thus become a means of conceptual and idea-based convergence. At national and institutional levels, information on good performance (that is increasingly set in the form of European harmonized, statistical categories) is converted into authoritative resource rewards and penalties at least in some national systems. There is a good case here to be made for studying the parallel or interactive development of quantified information-based systems of governance at the European, national, sub-national and HE institutional level.

We would expect to see differentiated effects of standardization as a means of control in this sector. A likely assumption is that in areas where there has been relatively little rule-based interaction between national governments and higher education institutions, there are consequently few institutionally entrenched practices and perspective. European set standards will penetrate more easily here compared to areas that are covered by well-established regulative frameworks.

From the two review reports a number of relevant research themes come to the fore with respect to the issue of the ‘standardization’ of European higher education, of which from a Norwegian perspective two areas are most relevant, i.e. first the shift in quality assessment of higher education towards learning outcomes and qualifications, and second the growing interest in and reliance on quantitative rankings. The shift to learning outcomes is reflected in the introduction of qualification frameworks, at the European as well as national levels. The European Qualifications Framework

(EQF) was formally accepted in 2008, and has in 2009 also become part of the EEA agreement. The EQF identifies eight levels of educational qualifications and describes the learning outcomes expected of each of these levels. It is regarded as a tool for comparing the various European educational systems with each other, not with the aim to harmonize these systems, but to make them more transparent and comparable. The learning outcomes attached to each of the eight EQF levels are described in terms of knowledge, competencies, and skills.

In the Bologna Process a comprehensive qualifications framework for higher education was accepted at the Ministers meeting in Bergen (2005). This framework covers the three qualification levels in higher education, i.e. Bachelor, Master and PhD level. Each Bologna country has committed itself to introduce a higher education qualifications framework, and to self-certify this framework against the overall framework.

The emergence of qualifications frameworks at the European level, and their adaptation and implementation at the national level, represent an attempt to standardize European higher education by making explicit what hitherto had been the implicit domain of higher education institutions and their academic staff members. It is an example of what happens when emerging European aspirations and institutions enter national higher education systems that traditionally have known a high level of system integration through national laws, regulations and funding. As national systemic borders are perforated nation states ability to keep national higher education systems coherent is challenged, suggesting a process of “de-bordering” taking place (Bartolini 2005, Kohler-Koch 2005). As we have seen in the two reviews, such de-bordering is not without tensions and the extent of and how de-bordering takes place will be conditioned by diverse national and institutional realities.

This has consequences, first for the way in which the institutional leadership in higher education has to handle the balance between the external pressure for standardizing the outcomes of higher education teaching and learning processes, versus the vested internal interests of the academic staff to remain in control over their academic domains. Second, the EQF implementation will bring quite different requirements for higher education institutions as a new quality of outside relations will emerge. The content and evaluation of education will no longer be an “internal” matter of higher education institutions, but will have a multitude of outside connections due to general qualifications framework implementation in societies. Third, through the introduction of qualifications frameworks for measuring the outcomes of higher education, higher education institutions are professional criteria developed within the “internal education perspective” and not imposed from the outside. Finally, it can be assumed that the qualifications framework “movement” will have a global impact, leading to worldwide changes in education, e.g. through sectoral qualifications frameworks.

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