

Working Papers on University Reform

Working Paper 14:

The organisation of the university

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April 2010

Title: *The organisation of the university*

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Published by: EPOKE, Department of Education, Aarhus University, 2010

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1. Edition

ISBN: 978-87-7684-933-7

***Working Papers on University Reform
Series Editor: Susan Wright***

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Background

This text was originally written as a background paper for the Danish Research Commission. This Commission was set up under a political agreement reached between all the parties represented in Parliament (except the Red-Green Alliance) in May 2000. The aim was to evaluate the need for reform in order to realign the Danish research system to the new knowledge-based economy.

The Danish Research Commission reported in September 2001, after the installation of a new Liberal-Conservative coalition government. The Commission's recommendations contributed to the debate leading to the University Law of May 2003, which reformed the purpose, governance and management of universities¹.

One of the issues on which the Commission was charged to make recommendations was the strengthening of research management. This paper was a contribution to that issue. It was also used by the committee 'University Boards in Denmark' that produced the report 'Recommendations for Good University Governance in Denmark' in December 2003². The paper first provides a brief historical introduction to the organisation of the university. It then outlines the research on universities as organisations from the 1960s until today. Finally Henry Mintzberg's theory on organisational forms is applied to an analysis of the university.

¹ The Danish Research Commission's report (in English) and the background report (in Danish) can be obtained at: <http://videnskabsministeriet.dk/site/forside/publikationer/2001/report-from-the-danish-research-commission>
<http://videnskabsministeriet.dk/site/forside/nyheder/pressemeddelelser/2001/forskningskommissionens-betaenkning>

² Obtainable at: <http://videnskabsministeriet.dk/site/forside/publikationer/2004/anbefalinger-for-god-universitetsledelse-i-danmark/recommenitilweb.pdf>

Historical introduction to the organisation of the university

In the Middle Ages, the university was a guild, or rather two guilds, which later merged: one teachers' guild – a 'college', and one students' guild – 'universitas'. The name of the teaching institution was 'studium generale', because students from many places could study there, as opposed to cathedral schools, which would only teach students from the same town. The university would be established by some authority capable of providing a statute or charter - a king, an emperor, a prince, or an archbishop. Whereas convents usually were empowered to tax a large number of peasants, the university most often had to resort to charging the students for teaching.

For centuries, the university consisted of two different types of organisations: colleges, a community of teachers and students, and the university proper. Teaching took place in the colleges, and the university examined and graduated the students. The degrees were 'bachelor', 'master' and 'doctor'. There were three professional faculties – law, medicine and theology – and one preparatory faculty called 'artes-liberales', which ranked slightly lower.

This organisational makeup was profoundly changed in continental Europe at the time of the French Revolution, but still prevails in universities such as Oxford and Cambridge. The colleges were autonomous and usually funded by a major gift or regular donations. The teachers comprised a college, which meant that each college governed itself. The university was governed by an academic committee, which was also in charge of appointing a rector. The medieval university was formally subject to the authority of a secular or ecclesiastical institution, but was in fact autonomous under the charter it had been given. Many teachers would also be monks, ensuring a connection between the universities and other formal institutions, such as convents

and religious orders. This changed with the Reformation, when the medieval university became a confessional institution primarily engaged in educating priests.

In Protestant countries, universities came under the authority of the throne. Not until the late 1600s did a more secularly oriented organisation of the university take shape, one based on a kind of religious tolerance. This first occurred at the university in Halle, and in 1788, the new mandate for the University of Copenhagen introduced the same approach.

Within a few years, another profound change took place, this time in Berlin in 1809, where the then Prussian Minister, Wilhelm von Humboldt, founded a new university based on his own notions about education and the ideas of the romantic philosophers, particularly Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814). In this new university, the four faculties were equally ranked, in that the artes-liberales faculty was now considered a professional faculty on a par with the others. This faculty educated teachers for secondary education, which was necessary because Humboldt had also introduced the notion of a liberal education for adolescents. Humboldt held that the university should be a state-sponsored institution with professors' teaching and research paid by the state, but that the university should work for the nation and play an important role in the construction of a national identity. The state in question was the Prussian state, and for Humboldt, the nation meant the German nation. Therefore the university was awarded extensive liberties: 'Lehrfreiheit' which was students' freedom to explore issues without administrative constraint, and 'Lernfreiheit', which was teachers' freedom to explore bodies of evidence (these concepts tied in with Humboldt's particular brand of romantic philosophy, which saw the development of the individual as the focal activity and the unconstrained and unlimited development and self-expression as the key). The university came to mean a community of teachers and students, who worked together in search of development and 'Bildung' through meeting with the unknown – research, in other words. The ideal teacher was a researching teacher, and a teaching researcher. The management was still in the hands

of the college, but a number of issues were dealt with in a central ministry of education and research.

This model became enormously influential in Denmark, and for a number of years in the mid-1800s, the University of Copenhagen was for all practical purposes in the hands of one man, Johan Nicolai Madvig, who was also instrumental in establishing the Danish Gymnasium, the upper secondary school; J.N. Madvig was in many ways a Danish mirror image of von Humboldt.

Universities in the United States also changed from the confessional model to a model where the obligation was to research freely in accordance with von Humboldt's ideals, although some parts of the medieval model were maintained. There would be a College of Arts and Sciences, which would be in charge of a preliminary bachelor degree, and a number of professional schools, which would provide the education proper – a School of Medicine, a School of Law and so on. To this was added researcher education in a School of Graduate Studies. Also, the university was organised in institutes, also called departments. The first universities to adopt this structure were Cornell and Johns Hopkins, dating from 1868 and 1872, respectively. Cornell was, as the vast majority of American universities, a 'land-grant' university, which is to say that it was founded on a donation of a huge tract of land earmarked for funding education and research, whereas Johns Hopkins was private. The major universities in continental Europe that emerged in the course of the nineteenth century were almost exclusively national institutions. One might therefore argue that around the year 1900, two types of university dominated the scene.

1 A national institution comprised of several faculties aimed at professional education (of doctors, lawyers, teachers for secondary education etc.) and research, funded by a national grant but with extensive autonomous powers derived from the medieval collegiate model.

2. The American model with a range of professional schools based on a more general bachelor education, and with a range of institutes that organise teaching and research. The researcher education is located at these institutes, but organised in a Graduate School. Funding comes from tuition fees and income from a 'land grant' or from fundraising. This organisation would typically be governed by the collegiate body and something more 'managerial' in nature, such as a hired 'president' and his staff.

We find examples of the first type in the Nordic countries as well as in Germany, The Netherlands and Belgium (University of Copenhagen, Helsinki University, Universität Göttingen, University of Leuven), while the other type is found in the United States (Stanford, Harvard, Cornell, Johns Hopkins).

The university as an organisation

What kind of organisation is this, then? An anecdote may illustrate this. General Eisenhower was at one point the senior 'president' at Columbia University in New York. He held a meeting with the teachers, at which he expressed his happiness at meeting with the employees of the university, and how he looked forward to meeting the rest and to working with them in the future. After a little while, later Nobel laureate Rabi rose from his seat and apologised for interrupting, before he said something along these lines: 'I am sorry, General, but there seems to have been a misunderstanding. We, the faculty, are not employees at the university. We ARE the university.' To Eisenhower, a university was an organisation like a company or the American army, and, as such, dependent on the employees while not identical with them. To Rabi, the university was no such thing, but rather the college of teachers, the faculty. Rabi expressed the traditional interpretation of a university, Eisenhower a more modern one.

In his book *All the Essential Half-truths about Higher Education*, G.D. O'Brien (1998) claims that while European universities still cling to a 'Rabian' perception of the university, the Americans have been successful in creating a sort of 'mixed mode' where the collegial (self-managed) and the managerial (that is, viewing the university as an organisation with employees, which needs to be organised like any other organisation) have managed to coexist (Type 2 above). This coexistence is not at all without issues, but this state of perpetual conflict has made the universities very strong and vital. It is, of course, of the utmost importance to note that in the government-institution universities (Type 1 above), the core of the university is the researchers, the teachers' corps. Of course they are employees, but since they have collegial autonomy, they are hired on other terms than employees in other national institutions, which are organised as hierarchical bureaucracies. It is also important to point out that a university run by a college can, of course, have regular employees to take care of, for instance, administrative tasks. Thus, an Oxford college includes 'fellows' as well as regular staff, such as the gardener.

Classifications of Organisations

There are many types of organisations, even in the business world. One organisation that resembles the university as identical with the corps of teachers is the monastery. The monks are not employees at the monastery, but this does not preclude the monastery from having regular employees – such as the aforementioned gardener. It is also rather obscure whether or not the monks own the monastery. They are the monastery. A factory owned by one person has employees, the workers, and the owner is the director. If the company is a limited company, the owner owns the stock and the board may or may not hire him as Chief Executive Officer (CEO). The board members are not employees per se, but the factory may still have different categories of employees – white-collar workers, weekly paid, gangs and so on. A law firm has partners, which to some degree own and make up the firm, and they may have regular

employees, such as legal secretaries. Among the typical organisational structures for businesses are the line organisation, which is focused on operations, and the line-and-staff organisation, which is a bit more complex and appeared in the wake of the Napoleonic wars as a result of the experiences and the project organisation from those wars.

A factory is either strictly line organised, or line-and-staff organised. A software company based on consultancy work is typically project organised. If the business is purely into operations, it is typically line-organised, while if the business is both operation and project organised – where the project typically consists of a restructuring of the line-operation – line/staff is the predominant mode. And when one assignment is different from the next, then project organisation is the typical mode. Bureaucracy can be viewed as a line-oriented case-administrating, operations organisation. A ministry is typically an ordinary line-and-staff type of bureaucracy, in that the department is a sort of staff, and various state agencies or more autonomous units are case-administrating, operations-oriented. Staff functions nearly always involve some amount of project organisation. Several organisational forms may co-exist to form matrix organisations. And finally the organisation may be of a temporary nature, and be established or dissolved – it is thus not just project organised, but also what is often termed a ‘temporary alliance’. This touches on the fundamental definition of an organisation.

The currently dominant text-book on organisation theory is Richard Scott’s (1998) ‘Organizations – Rationale, Natural and Open Systems’, which defines the concept as follows:

Organisations are systems of mutually interdependent activities that involve shifting coalitions of partners. The organisation is one part of a larger system and dependent on its environment, which thereby also has a constituting influence on the organisation’ (quoted in P. Mejlby et. al. 2003).

How does such a classification of types of organisations relate to universities? It appears obvious that contemporary university research is, for all intents and purposes, project-organised. Research is typically organised as projects involving several partners, although sometimes also as one-man shows. Projects may be organised in clusters, which then make up a department, a research unit or even an entire institute and so on. Teaching at universities is an operational task. The administration of universities operates along the lines of staff and they have various affiliated committees consisting of researchers. This may include a research committee, a committee in charge of the apparatus etc. etc. This means we can start by noting that the vast majority of universities are mixed organisations, consisting of two types of organisation; one line/staff-like and one project oriented. The two may be more or less interwoven. With several faculties, which often offer several different education programmes each, we see a sort of division, where the top management actually holds a staff-function, and the line-staff lies within the individual divisions – faculties or part of faculties, and at the very bottom we find the project part, since research is only carried out at the level of the various research groups. There may be an overlap between institutes and education programmes, but quite often the case is more complex than that. One institute contributes, along with other institutes, to a single education programme, or to a range of education programmes. One institute may also provide several different education programmes.

I find that the perspective that best grasps the layering of different forms of organisations in universities is the organisational analysis by the Canadian researcher, Henry Mintzberg (1983), called ‘Structure in Fives – Designing Effective Organizations’. Various incarnations of his model have been used for analysis of universities, other institutions of higher education, research institutions and researcher communities. Before I turn to Mintzberg to take further my analysis of universities as organisations, I shall present a brief overview of the historical development of research in this field.

Research on Universities as Organisations since the 1960s

Research into academic institutions can be divided into a number of different efforts. Early research in the 1960s dealt with universities as primarily collegial, and their decision-making processes were consensus-seeking and involved endless discussions among the peers. This was a self-regulating academic community with no need for outside management or a hierarchical bureaucracy. Examples of this can be found in P. Goodmann (1962) *The Community of Scholars* and J.D. Millett (1962) *The Academic Community*. This kind of research was criticized for painting an almost idyllic image of the universities, and was followed by a period in the 1970s where focus was on the university as a political arena. Different fractions competed over scarce resources. External factors, such as academic standing and external funding, played a part in resolving internal conflicts. J.V. Baldrige's (1971) *Power and Conflict in the University* is a good example of this. Such analyses were heavily criticised for being based on an altogether too rationalistic organisational model. What followed was a series of studies that were based on kinds of 'anarchy-models'. Karl Weick (1976) developed his notion of loosely coupled systems to characterise systems like universities, and M.D. Cohen and J. March (1974) spoke of 'organised anarchy'. It was the expressed lack of coordination within the educational institutions, universities in particular, that caught their interest. Weick's loosely coupled systems described lack of regulation, minimal contact between management and academic staff, lack of congruence between structure and activities, differences in methods, objectives and mission between the various parts of the organisation – typically institutes – and only the smallest possible amount of mutual interdependency among institutes and research groups, and finally only the barest minimum of transparency in the organisation. In Cohen and March, the term 'organised anarchy' meant that management was more or less impossible and would by necessity be 'weak' or purely

symbolic. The room to manoeuvre for management would be very small. Actual management through the use of power, political management or bureaucratic management would be inefficient. Cohen and March went so far as to talk of a 'leadership of foolishness'.

Research in the 1980s continues along these lines, although the notion of 'organised anarchy' came under fire. Analyses of French and German universities did however confirm the proposed explanations for organised anarchy. In *How Colleges Work. The Cybernetics of Academic Organization and Leadership* (1988), R. Birnbaum presented a cybernetic version of organised anarchy, where the cybernetic element was that academic organisations are by and large self-regulating. They were, therefore, in his view efficient organisations, where 'management muscle' would prove inefficient. Universities and research institutions are therefore perceived as organisations that only allow for symbolic management. Models of anarchy and the idea of only having a weak management still prevail in much of the literature about universities as organisations.

In the 1990s, a new type of research appeared, one that analysed the changes in the universities from the point of view of management theory. Outside events began to gain influence, such as cutbacks or other restraints on public funding, increasing numbers of students, globalisation and commercialisation of advanced education. Several researchers argued that universities would only be capable of fending for themselves if they responded adequately to the changes in their environment. They had to develop strategies, adopt strategic management and benchmarks for efficiency, reduce expenses and evaluate the quality of research and education. Studies seemed to show that the university was transforming from a traditional collegial university to an enterprising university, which more resembles a business than the old model. Researchers often warned against abandoning the 'old' collegial values and adopting more managerial ones in their place. B.R. Clark's (1998) *Creating Entrepreneurial Universities* is probably the key contribution in this respect. He analysed the

development of five universities in five different countries, and claimed that the changes in the universities in response to outside influences depended on the following factors: a strengthened professional and administrative core, an extensive and developed periphery, a diversified funding structure, a close and stimulating relation to key elements in the surrounding society and an entrepreneurial culture ingrained in the very universities. These factors had to be combined, and to Clark this meant that the change in the universities would be incremental. We have seen countless studies of this type of change. Research generally shows a huge opposition to change in the universities. But this research is often accused of being normative, and of attempting to contribute to the changes, rather than just analysing them. Examples of these research programmes include the entire 'movement' surrounding the Triple Helix-model, see for instance H. Etzkowitz og L. Leydesdorff eds. (1997) *Universities and the Global Knowledge Economy. A Triple Helix of University-Industry-Government Relations*.

Applying Mintzberg's theory of organisational forms to the analysis of universities

I shall now return to Henry Mintzberg and his model of various types of organisations. Mintzberg assumes that an organisation's shape is to a large degree determined by its surroundings. These may be constant and stable or dynamic and changing, they may be simple or complex. In organisations, coordination takes place through a series of 'mechanisms'. If complexity increases, we see a shift from mutual adaptation to actual surveillance, and finally – at a very high level of complexity – a return to the state of mutual adaptation. Standardisation may be standardisation of work, product or skills. Knowledge organisations are typically complex and use either standardisation of skills and norms or of mutual adaptation. If the surroundings are stable, the coordination takes place through standardisation, while if they are dynamic, it happens through mutual adaptation. This results in two predominant types of knowledge organisation,

the professional bureaucracy and the adhocracy. Mintzberg adds that any organisation consists of at least five elements: the production unit which performs the actual transformation of input into output (at a university this will be the college of individual teachers, the individual researchers or the individual research teams); the top- and middle management; the technological structure and finally the supporting staff. A sixth element might enter the picture, and this might be the organisation's ideology, as expressed in the organisation's mission and fundamental values and mores. Ideology – or maybe 'culture' would be a better word – creates coherence among the other five elements. Mintzberg views the organisation as a system of currents flowing between these elements. He also analyses various kinds of adaptation between the structure and surroundings, and ways in which centralisation and decentralisation can come about. His main hypothesis is that efficient organisations achieve that state through establishing an internal coherence between their design parameters. In any given type of organisation, certain coordination mechanisms will dominate, certain parts of the organisation be more important than others, and different kinds of decentralisation be in force (quoted from Sørensen's (2000) application of Mintzberg's theory in a Danish setting). The different parts of an organisation pull in different directions. Top management will work for a centralisation, middle management for a 'Balkanisation', the technological structure towards standardisation, the supporting staff towards collaboration, and the production core towards professionalism. Taking a closer look at the two types of organisation that are most relevant for the understanding of the universities, we get the following:

	Coordination	Key element	Form of decentralisation
Professional bureaucracy	Standardisation of skills	Production core	Vertical and horizontal decentralisation
Adhocracy	Mutual adaptation	Support staff and production core	Selective decentralisation

In cases where middle managers obtain power, we see a fragmented structure develop, such as when the deans and faculties are the real powers at a university.

Generally speaking, a university as a teaching institution falls squarely into the category of a professional bureaucracy. This can be fragmented, e.g. if the range of topics is wide. As a project-organised research institution comprised of research units, however, a university resembles an adhocracy.

The professional bureaucracy is a bureaucracy devoid of centralisation. It operates in a stable environment, and with a high degree of complexity. Among the examples of this we find universities, hospitals, lawyers' offices and insurance companies. In the professional bureaucracy, we may find parallel hierarchies, such as when a university has an administration or a university library. Professional bureaucracies have a hard time working out strategies, particularly because they are based on the production core and operate through standardisation of skills, for instance through academic evaluations. The professional bureaucracy is democratic and allows its members a huge degree of autonomy, but there still are a number of problems with this kind of organisation, such as a low degree of coordination and innovation – they are rigid and highly conservative – and from the outside they appear impervious. Attempts to influence such an organisation take place through the introduction of other coordination mechanisms, direct control, or standardisation of tasks or of products/outputs. The more complex the organisation and its tasks, the less successful these efforts are.

The adhocracy is characterised by using mutual adaptation – typically through collaboration – as a coordinating mechanism. The production core and supporting staff are key elements. This comes about when we have a combination of complex surroundings and constant change. Research centres, software developers, movie and music production companies exemplify this. The deciding factor here is innovation, and a more organic than bureaucratic type of organisation. Adhocracies are manned

by independent experts who collaborate without developing rules or standardisation of skills. An adhocracy is unaffected by traditional management. Typically there is no clear chain of command, and when there is a chain of command, it is ambiguous. Mintzberg distinguishes between an operative and an administrative adhocracy. The operative is characterised by a blending together of operational and administrative work forms, which is the result of a difficulty in separating the planning and design of a task from doing the task in question. The operative adhocracy is creative and innovative, always looking for new solutions, while a professional bureaucracy in the same situation will attempt to come up with a standard solution, to make a challenging situation a familiar occurrence. The difference can be illustrated by the difference between research and consultancy work. An administrative adhocracy is a department, which establishes its own autonomy and grows into an adhocracy, for instance when a number of operational functions are outsourced. In an adhocracy the gap between line and staff is non-existent. A research institution with just one huge and coherent research project will typically be an operative adhocracy, even if minor parts of it take different shapes – such as an imbedded canteen or workshop. Subjected to rapid change, a professional bureaucracy will grow into an adhocracy. This is the result of the lack of efficiency in standardising skills under those circumstances. The parts of the research world where development is very rapid are typically organised as adhocracies. Development in the realm of IT – where IT in research is typically not primarily a technological structure, but a part of the support staff – tends to push research institutions in the direction of adhocracies.

Mintzberg's concepts were used by Hanne Foss Hansen in her analysis of a Danish research institution – She calls it FORSK – which has been widely publicised, for instance in H.F. Hansen and P. Neergaard (1991) *Organisation og økonomistyring (Organisation and Economy Management)*. In this volume, Hansen and Neergaard argue that the new Danish universities from the 1970s, Roskilde University Centre and Ålborg University Centre, can be viewed as adhocracies that have recently evolved into professional bureaucracies.

Conclusion

One may conclude that universities – whether American research universities (which is to say about 100 of the approximately 3,000 American universities that have research and researcher education as their primary function) or Danish universities like Århus University or the University of Southern Denmark are mixed organisations. They are project organised, and they are line/staff organised. They have a long tradition of collegial forms of work, which is very important. They are often talked about in terms of ‘organised anarchy’ or ‘loosely coupled’, and the management form is typically symbolic rather than real. In Mintzberg’s terms they can be understood as overall professional bureaucracies with adhocracies at the atomic level. The individual research unit is an adhocracy. They probably generally tend towards increased project organisation and adhocracy if the surroundings change and call for change in the organisation – such as the ‘entrepreneurial university’ mentioned earlier, or the development in research and technology, which is extremely rapid in fields such as biotech and IT. This gives rise to a series of organisational and managerial challenges familiar from other fields - challenges which many creatively and innovatively - oriented organisations have struggled with.

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