

The Nordic model of higher education contested (0310)

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An overarching motive for the analysis presented in this paper is to obtain a more systematic, empirically and comparatively based understanding of the Nordic model of higher education. The study focuses on the period from 1970 to 2010.

From an international perspective the Nordic higher education system can be described in terms of a particular model – the Nordic welfare state higher education system. The defining features of this Nordic model are high levels of public funding, low levels of contributions or fees from students, and systems largely publicly-owned and relatively closely regulated by the state.

In the postwar period, egalitarian ideas of higher education as a public good have had a major impact on the policies of the Nordic governments, particularly in terms of the accessibility of HE and progressive recruitment patterns; (both in student body and among academics, where more women achieve academic positions than in most European countries

In contrast to liberal (USA, Canada, Australia) or corporative (France, Germany) welfare state models, the social democratic welfare state model of the Nordic countries to a larger extent builds upon the universal welfare rights of the citizen independent of economic status and labour. HE institutions were assigned an important role effectuating central policy goals of the welfare state. Furthermore, the egalitarian aspect of the higher education system could be illustrated by relatively similar financial and legal conditions provided to the institutions by the state.

The changes taking place in Nordic higher education today include: market oriented modes of governance; performance based funding; more variety of funding sources; and public-private partnerships within research and researcher training, are related to the same global processes. These processes are characterised by a gradual de-coupling of the state as guarantor of academic quality, autonomisation of governing bodies, dependence upon production, and more power to external stakeholders and administrators as planners and organisers of the academic community.

As regards governance, measures have been undertaken to strengthen institutional autonomy within all national systems. The steering regime gradually introduced in the last two decades has been characterised by performance-based funding and emphasis on such soft and lateral forms of steering as quality and stakeholder-oriented external evaluations of research and education. Democratic collegial modes of steering have largely been replaced with managerial forms of steering. Denmark and Finland have introduced the most “extreme”

versions, as higher education institutions are now being organised as independent legal bodies. All these developments emphasise accountability for researchers and institutions, and make funding more performance-oriented in the attempt to establish elite institutions. The creation of new competitive structures for the (best) allocation of assessment, ranking and funding – such as the introduction of tuition fees; Centres of Excellence; PhD schools; the transformation of faculties and basic units into “schools”; the mergers of universities and/or departments – is symptomatic of the Nordic model of higher education as part of the process of transition from the welfare state to the welfare society. The state no longer solely takes the role of protector, while to a greater extent expecting the higher education institutions to operate as entrepreneurs in a global market.

More than ever before the Nordic approach with regard to accessibility is ambiguous, and we also find examples where stricter criteria for selection have been introduced as a strategy for enhancing quality and status. Further elite tracks are under development, such as the organisation and selection of pupils and students for elite schools or for research tracks in secondary school. A general conclusion might be that the Nordic higher education system has moved towards being more pluralistic and fragmented, with inherent dynamics and mechanisms promoting homogenisation/divergence, cooperation/competition and inclusion/exclusion. Furthermore, the systems now include a remarkable number of institutions of different size, profile and traditions, competing for excellence, visibility and not least resources.

As revealed in this analysis the history and traditions of national systems vary considerably, and continue to shape contemporary higher education systems and policies. Structures and organisations differ in terms of features such as the degree system, positional hierarchy and typical institutional forms. Policy features such as modes of steering, modes of governance, management models and access policy also vary, with higher education systems organised differently, as in the organisation of vocational and academic tracks and the links between them. The countries differ in how far established are the relationships with wider national structures of social stratification, the professions and the world of work, or economic and innovation systems.

We might conclude that the Nordic model of higher education has to be understood as an ideal type: in practice we find various national models reflecting a different set of policies and rules in every country; each of the Nordic countries has its own economic and social models. The outcome of seemingly homogenous processes of change depends on the national and institutional context, and the question of convergence or divergence depends on what level we study. In our further investigation we attempt to distinguish between: a) how and why the Nordic higher education model changes; b) if the respective national systems are becoming more homogeneous or diverse as a result of globalisation and international standardisation processes; and c) which effects the recent changes of the government structures bring about.

Our analysis is based on a synthesis of existing research, research literature of general relevance, reports, public and other documents, web sites, statistics and budgets.

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