

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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University Leaders' Motives for Institutional Autonomy in Finland

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Research Domain: Management, leadership, governance and quality (MLGQ)

Abstract:

The Finnish institutional autonomy reform 2010 pushed university leaders and academics to a juncture where they must navigate through new governance and management dynamics. Enabling the two types of players – foundation-run universities and universities under public law – to become more autonomous and competitive was one of the key elements of autonomy reform. Since 2010 the Finnish university reform has been evaluated several times. The latest national review in 2021 considered the current state of autonomy of universities in two types of universities. This article will use the author's previous research on university leaders' motives for autonomy to analyse how their motives fit or confront the state of autonomy based on the most recent review.

Paper: Background

This study continues Kohtamäki's (2020) study on Finnish university leaders' motives for autonomy and strategies to deal with simultaneous resource dependence. University autonomy in Western European countries, such as Finland, is provided to universities as *given autonomy* through a system-level reform. In new public management-oriented governance reforms, Finland has faithfully followed, institutional autonomy is granted to university-level managers to incentivise universities to respond to changing competitive environments (Bleiklie, Enders, and Lepori 2017; Dobbins, Knill, and Vögtle 2011; Kwiek 2012; cf. Verhoest et al. 2004). While autonomy is an important and sensitive issue for universities (e.g., Christopher 2012; Hicks 2012), its elements take shape among others in power-based relationships, as assumed from the new public management perspective.

Universities do not have identical levels of autonomy or similar external restrictions. University leaders and managers are the ones who aspire to manage how institutional autonomy frames and shapes the institutions' academic and administrative operations. Public universities usually lack well-established practices for operating under the new dynamics of university autonomy (Herbst 2007). However, foundation universities in Finland have the same state agency history as public universities.

Aims and objectives

While autonomy has attracted researchers' attention for several decades, there is little research that reveals university leaders' motivations for institutional or financial autonomy. This area of research is specifically interesting in the Finnish context due to the two types of legal players that have been operated since 2009. The purpose of this study is to explore the current autonomy dynamics

characterising Finnish universities.

University autonomy is a multiform amoeba emerging from *de jure* and *de facto* meanings and interpretations. In Finland *de jure* meaning is prevalent and this can be perceived in past and present autonomy reports and evaluations. Universities have different profiles, agendas and ideals as internal governance frames. Similarly, university legislation provides the autonomy frames, but the shape of *de facto* autonomy is at least partly in the hands of university leaders.

This study is useful in offering reflections for university leaders, researchers and policymakers and for other countries when designing or evaluating system-level autonomy policy reforms.

Research questions, data and analysis

Main research question guides this study, as follows: How university leaders' motives for autonomy fit or confront the current state of autonomy frames available for Finnish universities.

The data consists of review on the Finnish university autonomy reform (Ministry of Education and Culture 2021). This study integrates new data to my previous interview findings (Kohtamäki 2020). In my previous study both academic and administrative organisational leaders' and unit-level academic leaders' perceptions were studied. The data are analysed using theory-driven content analysis. The RDT (resource dependence theory) and its assumptions, along with the game metaphor, provide the frame for empirical analysis.

Theoretical approach

The RDT (recourse dependence theory) focuses on the top-level managers' actions and interests (Fowles 2014; Pfeffer and Salancik 2003). The RDT reveals how the environment (current state of autonomy) potentially affects an organisation's internal dynamics. RDT guides to look at leaders' motives for autonomy against the current state of autonomy. The EGF (Ecology of Game Framework), as discussed by Firestone (1989) and Lubell (2013; also Berardo & Lubell 2019), serves a lens to explore university autonomy as games. Both theoretical approaches offer insights into motivations for autonomy (gains, and avoidance of potential loss of autonomy) in current circumstances.

Findings

After leaving the state-agency status, the increasing complexity of the academic enterprise also concerns Finnish higher education institution). Universities are (in)dependent, autonomy-framed agents; this status offers and requires a new, demanding competitive player role for leaders and managers as well. Kohtamäki (2020) found that simultaneous university autonomy and resource dependence and their evolution is driven by the results of interaction among the several components (players, issues, interests, rules) as assumed in the EGF metaphor and RDT. What flows to these games arrives from various sources and other games (Firestone 1989; Lubell 2013). University leaders are not identical players not are the games identical across universities.

Autonomy evaluations are also part of the games referred above. The recent autonomy review (2021) concludes that the development of autonomy is based on universities' internal regulations, and the adoption of good practices and universities' own activity to use autonomy.

If this proposal is approved, findings will be presented in the SRHE conference in December 2021.

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