

## **Expectations of independence in PhD education and supervision: On the cultural norms of independence and its echoes of activist interventions**

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### **Research Domains**

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

### **Abstract**

Independence forms a key ideal in PhD education and supervision. In practice, however, independence is a complicated matter entangled in the cultural norms of local environments and national traditions.

This paper explores the expectations of independence in PhD supervision in the context of the recent internationalisation of PhD education in Denmark. Highlighting PhD students' and supervisors' expectations and uncertainties surrounding independence, it examines the cultural norms associated with independence. Contemplating these norms, the paper traces the concept of independence in Danish education, highlighting how activists after World War 2 were re-inventing independence, linking it to aims of democratising education. Considering this legacy, the paper calls for a renewed concern with the echoes of democracy in independence in the context of cross-cultural PhD supervision today.

### **Full paper**

#### **Introduction**

Independence forms a key value in PhD education and supervision (Elliot et al., 2023; Nerad et al., 2022:20-21). Rooted in pedagogic and political ideals shaping Western modern universities, independence was once associated with the solitude and freedom necessary for specialised research (Clark 2006:446). Recent studies, however, suggest independence is a more complicated matter entangled in cultural norms and the supervision practices of local environments (Wichmann-Hansen & Nielsen 2023, Bastalich, 2017).

This paper explores the expectations of independence in the face of recent internationalisation in Danish PhD education (Baggersgaard, 2023). Taking its point of departure in PhD students' and supervisors' expectations and uncertainties surrounding independence, it contemplates the cultural norms of independence in Danish higher education. It draws on an anthropological comparative approach (Strathern, 1992:59, Lebner, 2017), to elucidate the cultural norms of independence by juxtaposing in-depth and ethnographic interviews with 12 PhD students and 8 supervisors (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014, Spradley 1979) across three

universities - to a historical moment when independence was key to efforts of democratizing education.

### **Expectations and uncertainties of independence**

In Danish higher education, the aim of supporting doctoral candidates achieving independence is institutionalised in doctoral education policies and pedagogies of supervision (cf. Retsinformation, 2014; Wickmann-Hansen, 2021). These expectations, however, give rise to uncertainties in PhD supervision. Interviews and participant-observation across different environments reveal PhD students' struggles to make sense of what independence entails, and their worries not to live up to expectations. These uncertainties are more prominent for international students, some of whom link this to being educated in a different environment and national tradition.

Supervisors with a Danish background broadly associate independence with taking initiative, not being too compliant and pursuing the extraordinary. They too express experiences of differences in student independence as related to nationality and cultural backgrounds.

These interviews show the precarity at stake in the expectations associated with independence, but also highlight the association of independence with different cultural experiences and norms informing expectations on the ideal student (Wong & Chiu, 2020). Tracing the concept of independence in Danish education allows for the contemplation of some of the cultural norms at stake.

### **Democracy and independence in postwar education**

Independence was already an ideal in the 1850s' educational reforms, but gained renewed attention during World War II (Ny Collegial-Tidende, 1845:721, Larsen, 2002). During this time, a movement of educators preoccupied with democratizing through education, replaced 19th century conceptions of independence as related to 'a study of specialized science' (Brøndsted 1945:35), with ideals of a critical attitude suitable for democratic decision-making and for resisting propaganda (cf. Mønsted et al. 1944:4, Arvin 1945:43).

John Dewey's ideas of democratizing education were central to these efforts. A proponent of these reformist ideas, teacher and rector in the upper-secondary school, Mogens Pihl, for example worked to introduce teaching that would stimulate students' active participation, ability to doubt, and independence (Pihl 1941:27, 1945, 1960). Later, as pro-rector at the University of Copenhagen in the 1960s, Pihl led a process of democratizing governance structures, including students and technical staff in decision-making, while also defending ideas of free research against calls for the direct use of research (Pedersen 1987).

The focus on independence among these educators also manifested in a new marking scale introducing the notion of independence in the descriptions of the best performances. This scale even entailed a mark for the extraordinary independent performance (Undervisningsministeriet

1963). It governed assessment in Danish universities 1971-2007. The re-invention of independence in these decades, thus, involved the critique of authoritarian modes of disciplining, but also an ideal of pursuing the extraordinary.

This movement working to democratize education was also key in the establishment of two reform universities in the 1970s, in which the participatory method of problem-oriented project work became a cornerstone, linking Dewey's ideas of the self-putting of a problem to an 'emancipatory interest of understanding' (Illeris 1974:13,156, Berthelsen et al. 1977:21).

## Conclusion

Drawing parallels between expectations in today's PhD supervision and the re-invention of independence after WW2 highlights the echoes of activist interventions aimed at democratizing education. It demonstrates how today's expectations of student independence related to taking initiative, not being too compliant and pursuing the extraordinary are norms reverberating a legacy of efforts to stimulate students' active participation, ability to doubt authoritarian modes of disciplining, and independent thinking. These echoes call for a closer look of how to revitalize democratic participation amidst the uncertainties inherent in cross-cultural PhD supervision today.

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