

Theorising Roadmaps in Futures Thinking in Higher Education

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Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

Abstract

We examine how the metaphors of roads and roadmaps have been enacted, understood, and applied in policy documents, and how they have been utilized in anticipatory governance within the field of higher education. We explore these questions through case studies of higher education reform initiatives in Finland and Denmark. Drawing on data collected through analysis of key documents produced in Finnish and Danish fields of higher education and interviews (n=27) with major policy actors in each setting, we show that in recent years the metaphors of road and roadmaps have been used to propose and legitimize higher education agendas in markedly different ways. Moreover, we suggest that in each case the roadmaps are employed to create imaginaries of a shared path to political unity in uncertain or even contested situations. In so doing, more attention should be paid to their creation, in attempts to steer higher education towards prescribed ends.

Full paper

Global concerns about the future -driven by a looming environmental crisis, international conflicts, and political polarities within nation-states- have ushered in significant changes in public governance (Witte, 2023; Marginson, 2024a, b). These changes focus on adopting new anticipatory practices for future preparedness, such as creation of visions and roadmaps, and developing new mode of governance supporting these practices. This shift of governance is evident also in the field of higher education, where anticipatory practices, originally developed for analyzing labor market relevance as part of educational planning, have been augmented by new governance techniques, such as visions, foresight and scenario building, along with institutional strategies for various time frames, long-term plans, and and other projections.

A new research agenda on anticipatory governance is emerging across disciplines, analyzing how these practices are used to govern uncertain future by seeking to foresee and reduce uncertainties, manage risks and seize opportunities (e.g. Berten & Kranke,

2022; Robertson, 2022). It examines anticipatory processes as sites of political negotiation and contestation, shaping the prioritization of policy agendas. These processes, involving various techniques to produce knowledge for policymaking, may result in either opening up or closing down development pathways. (Anderson, 2010; Andersson, 2018; Beckert & Bronk, 2018, Beckert, 2020; Rizvi et al., 2022; Muiderman et al., 2023; Kallo & Välimaa, 2024.) Among these anticipatory governance techniques, the metaphors of road and road maps are now widely used in policy development. While these metaphors represent tropes that are familiar to everyone, the different ways in which they are employed in structuring governance of higher education is not always clear. They differ in scale from proposals for global roadmaps (UNESCO 2023) to those focused on world regions (European Council, 2025), nation states or individual institutions. Unclear also are ontological, epistemological and teleological assumptions embodied in their usage in these differing contexts.

In this research, we address this gap by exploring how two Nordic countries—Denmark and Finland— deploy the metaphors of road and roadmaps to create and promote images of the future, towards which their higher education institutions are expected to travel. We examine the use of the road metaphor and the creation of roadmaps in policy reforms within Danish and Finnish higher education, focusing on the underlying logics of these roadmaps and the consequences of their use (Reform Commission, 2022; Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019, 2025). Through this analysis, we seek to identify similarities and differences across these two Nordic welfare systems, the ways in which they envisage the demands of the future, and how they utilize their projections to steer higher education governance.

The enactment of the future higher education policies in Denmark and Finland constitutes an interesting case of analysis, given their shared features as part of 'Nordic higher education model', as well as their institutional differences and the adoption of global trends and influences (Wright 2020; Kallo, 2021). The Nordic HEIs are considered as socially responsible institutions assigned to address future challenges. It is characteristic of Nordic welfare societies to invest in education, and to consider equality as one of the central values (Kettunen & Pedersen, 2022; Välimaa, 2018). Given the progressive slant of the Nordic model and the aspirations of the countries to offer leadership in addressing future challenges, together with the fact that underlying values of sustainable development goals adhere with those of the Nordic model, it would be expected that Nordic HEIs would easily adopt or even assume leadership in solving future problems. However, reconsidering this positive slant seems necessary, as it remains unclear what the Nordic model actually signifies and whether Nordic societies correspond to their globally distributed public image (Stensaker & Hermansen, 2025).

Drawing on data collected through analysis of key documents produced in Finnish and Danish fields of higher education and interviews (n=27) with major policy actors in each setting, we show that in recent years the metaphors of road and road maps have been used to propose and legitimize higher education agendas in Denmark and Finland in markedly different ways. Moreover, we suggest that in each case the roadmaps have

become an authorized method for powerful knowledge claims about the future in attempts to make sense of and arrange complex realities by presenting something tangible (e.g. Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kuusisto 2009; Kallo & Välimaa, 2024). They are used to create imaginaries of a common and shared path and to political unity in uncertain or even contested situations (cf. Berliner, 2014). In so doing, more attention should be paid to their creation and implementation, in attempts to steer higher education towards prescribed ends.