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Introduction to Transnationalisation and Nordic higher education - tensions and possibilities in educational policy

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Abstract

The recent developments in Nordic higher education policy are closely linked with global tendencies, which are in turn reacted to at national and local levels. The financial crisis, massification of higher education, and the attachment to transnational, mainly European policies have set the background for new tendencies in education governance. New governance patterns are the outcome of transnational pressures, which are domesticated

at the national level. Thus, these transnational tendencies are (re-)constructed for different transnational, national and local purposes. This thematic issue analyses how the Nordic countries have reacted to these tendencies, tensions and possibilities.

Key words: Nordic higher education, higher education policy, networked policy, marketization, transnational and national

Introduction to *Transnationalisation and Nordic higher education - tensions and possibilities in educational policy*

Arja Haapakorpi and Taina Saarinen

Education policy is usually approached by applying epistemologies based on structural thinking, which is related to the empirical context itself. Governance, policy and systems of education can easily be seen as (re-)presentations of structures and relations between structures. Analysis of transnational policy further reinforces the structural interpretation, as “transnational” brings an extra hierarchical dimension above the national level. (See Saarinen & Ursin 2012.) There are, however, alternative ways to analyze higher education policies. Structures need actors to maintain or change them; equally, transnational and national are not hierarchically settled but intertwined.

We have investigated education policy in Nordic countries and the related transnational tendencies from structure-actor perspectives and explored new governance patterns as an outcome of transnational, national and local strategies. Transnational regulations, particularly European patterns within the European Union and in the Bologna Process, have been implemented in ways which also promote national purposes. In addition, higher education institutions themselves exercise power when applying regulations related to

governance (see for example Johannsdottir and Jónasson in this publication). Human action takes place in every institutional setting, which in turn shapes the outcome. Research is needed to reveal not only the effects of transnational pressures but also the purposes of national education policy, as well as interests and strategies of higher education institutions and stakeholder organizations.

The new governance in education is referred to in the articles in this issue as “soft governance”, “open method for coordination” or “outsourcing of policy”, which all describe new ways of exercising power in policy making. Massification of education has promoted more flexible way of governance, as traditional decision making at the national level is time consuming and heavy because of parliamentary (i.e. democratic) practises and established education governance. Decision making in education policy is carried out by networks or agencies of experts, in other words outside the direct parliamentary decision making.

These temporary or loose organizations consist members of education institutions, national governance organizations, policy makers, stakeholders, experts and consultants.

On the basis of our studies, our particular attention is addressed to new practices of exercising power in educational contexts. We have recognised negative outcomes, such as inconsiderate implementation of standardized and quasi-market patterns in education institutions and negative impact on democratic decision making patterns.

However, we have also found out that the new governance has to be approached from multiple perspectives. The conclusions of our final discussion at Lillehammer NERA congress 2014 particularly focused on the role of researchers and research work in

education policy. Decision making in networks, being part of soft governance, also provides opportunities for wider interest group participation than traditional decision making of governments and ministries: the representatives of universities already participate in these networks. International interaction between scholars has increased within the European Union and more advantage could be taken from the collaboration to influence education policy by researchers themselves.

The articles deal with education policy in Nordic countries and related transnational tendencies. The Nordic countries form a particular focus for study, on one hand sharing particular policies, and on the other, currently implementing the transnational policies in different ways. Historically, the idea of welfare society, social values, trust and a Nordic type of democracy (Jacobsson & Lægneid & Pedersen, 2003;) have formed the basis for what has been termed “the Nordic model” in education (Telhaug, Mediås & Aasen 2006). Education policy in Nordic countries has similar background as regards to values of economic equality and democracy, although there is variation and divergent tendencies in policy and institutions. In the European Union context, the similarities are, however, remarkable, which supply a basis for collaborated influencing in education policy and research policy in education. As the subject area is extensive, the articles put emphasis on different perspectives.

This thematic issue consists of five articles.

Three of the articles focus on the transnational perspective and how these policy

tendencies are reacted to in Nordic countries. The domestication of external pressures takes place in education policy, but also at higher education institutions. The outcome of the domestication process varies in Nordic countries, but similarities are found in the interrelationship between soft governance of the European Union and the national applications.

Gyda Jóhannsdóttir and Jon Torfi Jónasson investigate the influence of internal versus external drivers on the development of Icelandic higher education system in their article *External and internal influences on the development of Icelandic Higher Education*. They also explore the expansion and structural development of the system. The role of internal drivers such as the state, higher education institutions themselves and the students is explored the light of academic drift.

John Benedicto Krejsler, Ulf Olsson and Kenneth Petersson study teacher education in Denmark and Sweden in their article *Nordic teacher education in transnational perspective: the cases of Danish and Swedish education reform*. They study the process of policy reforms; how teacher education is being gradually and thoroughly transformed according to standardized templates that emerge from policy processes in transnational fora, the European Union, the Bologna Process and the OECD. These policy processes follow the pattern of soft governance: consensus takes place in non-transparent processes where no explicit political decisions are made.

The article *Transnational turn and national models of higher education -- Case Finland* by

Arja Haapakorpi and Taina Saarinen problematizes the relationship between the Nordic democratic public higher education tradition and transnational market driven knowledge economy policies. The article illustrates this development with two cases dealing with quality assurance and internationalisation policies, where external demands, based mostly on market ideologies, have been introduced with apparently transnational incentives but very national implementations. These transnational pressures are related to a kind of outsourcing of higher education policy, which moves decision making into networks outside the national parliament.

Two articles focus particularly on Nordic higher education. The articles by Palle Rasmussen (*The impact of accreditation arrangements in Danish higher education*) and Risto Rinne, Arto Jauhiainen and Jenni Kankaanpää (*Surviving in the ruins of university? Lost autonomy and collapsed dreams in Finnish transition of university policies*) investigate higher education reforms in the framework of transnational pressures, mainly European agreements. Rasmussen's article describes the development of the accreditation system and its impact on Danish higher education. The article provides an interesting perspective on how the Bologna-related agreement on quality assurance is intertwined with Danish national higher education policy. The article by Rinne, Jauhiainen and Kankaanpää focuses on Finnish higher education policy and particularly on the current outcomes of transnational and national policy. Policy reforms and the quality assurance related to the Bologna agreement provide the policy environment that shapes governance of higher education institutions and academic work in universities.

This thematic issue originates from the NERA congresses in Reykjavik 2013 and Lillehammer 2014. The theme received interesting contributions and we found it worthwhile to begin editing a thematic issue based on the papers. In 2014, the authors organized a symposium under the NERA network *Politics of education and education policy studies*, invited by John Krejsler and Sverker Lindblad, the former convenors of the network. All authors were extremely committed to the process, not only by writing, rewriting and revising the manuscripts, but also taking an active role in our internal peer review process. Our external Nordic peer reviewers deserve our warmest thanks for their valuable comments.

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