

Chapter 2

Strategic Management of Academic Human Resources: A Comparative Analysis of Flagship Universities in Norway, Finland, Switzerland, and Austria

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ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates whether and how institutional autonomy enhances strategic management of academic human resources. National regulatory frameworks, available resources, university policies, and practices at the working floor are compared in four European flagship universities. Disciplinary affiliation is taken into consideration through the selection of history and chemistry. The cases reflect different trajectories where substantial changes have been implemented in governance systems when it comes to centralization of decision making, to standardization of procedures, to re-configuration of actors and their room to maneuver. While professorial self-governance in personnel matters remains significant, new boundary conditions constrain substantially choice options in accordance with national, institutional, and disciplinary features. Uncertainty, identity, and flexibility emerge as major dimensions in human resources management, pointing to tensions but also to opportunities for strategic change.

INTRODUCTION

The specific nature of universities as organizations has been stressed in scholarly debate: following Cohen and March work on academia (1974), university distinctive characteristics would allow organizational change only to a limited extent (Whitley 2008, Musselin 2006). Hence, educa-

tion and research cannot be coordinated and controlled because of their inherent unclearness and ambiguity (Cohen & March 1974, p. 3). On the one hand, core operations of teaching and research are unclear processes which cannot be copied, prescribed or reproduced. On the other hand, they are ambiguous, as precise goals cannot be defined or scheduled. Multiple uncertainties

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influence knowledge production and dissemination (Musselin, 2006; Gläser, 2007) and hamper the possibility to build a strategy based on distinctive organizational capabilities (Whitley, 2008; Bonaccorsi & Daraio, 2007).

Besides, the scientific community has its own distinctive rules characterizing its uniqueness and the conditions of its existence (Merton, 1973). In the professional bureaucracy described by Mintzberg (1979, p. 348) the academic oligarchy coordinates university functioning by establishing standards of quality and by determining entry requirements for new members, based on distinctive skills and training. More specifically in university personnel policies professors apply their own (collegial) system in order to recruit and promote their peers. This is based on scientific and disciplinary criteria that traditionally shape the overall assessment of candidates. More recently, the increasing role of the university board, of the rectorate and of the central administration as well as the formalization and standardization of procedures of recruitment, have put under pressure these practices historically carried out by professors (Fumasoli, 2011, 2013; Fumasoli & Goastellec, 2014).

At the same time, in the last decades public authorities have granted, at different degrees and paces, institutional autonomy to higher education institutions (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson 2000; Paradeise et al., 2009; Huisman, 2009; Kehm & Lanzendorf, 2006) with the explicit intent to increase their strategic behavior (Verhoest et al., 2004). Nowadays goals are set for the whole organization; financially, block grants are provided according to contracts of performance. In a governance perspective, university leadership seems to profit from increasing power, while external systems of evaluation have been introduced to standardize education and research (for research see Whitley & Gläser, 2007).

It is then relevant to understand how universities are coping with their human resources¹, to what extent increasing institutional autonomy

has transformed the traditional practices held by the academic profession, where criteria for recruitment and career advancement were based on academic merits and university politics. In sum, it is significant to observe whether and how strategic management of human resources has been developed. The objective of this chapter is to investigate how and to what extent personnel policies have been modified by the recent reforms in European higher education systems. Personnel policies have been addressed as a key organizational area to control and coordinate academic staff, which represents the most important asset for universities. By shedding light on the (shifting) authority between academics, academic leaders and external stakeholders in the management of human resources and the dynamics underlining such changes, it is possible to understand change and stability in higher education. To do so regulatory frameworks, university policies and practices at the work-floor level are analyzed through a multi-level case study, which takes into account national systems, institutional settings, as well as departments, conceived as organizational structures embodying disciplinary fields.

The sample comprises four European Flagship universities: University of Oslo (Norway), University of Helsinki (Finland), University of Basel (Switzerland) and University of Vienna (Austria). Two disciplines have been observed: chemistry (Oslo and Helsinki), history (Basel and Vienna). A Flagship university is defined as a comprehensive, research intensive university, located in a major urban area. In general it is among the oldest and largest higher education institutions of its country. This focus on 'flagships' has implications for the nature of organizational change under scrutiny here, since this category of universities can be expected to be given more leeway than others because of their scientific leading role at the national level (Fumasoli et al., 2014).

The following research questions are addressed:

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