The second issue is the planned capital investment for a large Humanities building on the ROQ site, whose estimated cost is (I believe) around £95m. Let me be clear that I have felt considerable enthusiasm for this development, and am dismayed by the double bind in which the whole project may now be caught. Nevertheless facts must be faced, however unpalatable, and money spent on one thing is not then available for another. The case for the building is a very strong one. This is a unique opportunity, because no other large site close to the centre is going to be available in the foreseeable future. As matters stand several faculties are in makeshift and inadequate buildings, while most faculty libraries are full to bursting and cannot offer decent study facilities on site. Provision for graduate students is almost non-existent, and large research grants cannot be envisaged because there is no space in which to house even modest teams of researchers.

The Humanities building project offers attractive solutions to these longstanding difficulties, so that it plainly deserves the highest priority. One can also argue that the building would facilitate interdisciplinary research, allow the creation of a major research centre that could also house visiting scholars, and generally act as a focus with numerous spin-off effects. All this is perfectly fair, and I am inclined to think that a new library and a graduate centre are an essential minimum, whatever else is delayed beyond the two years currently proposed.

However I am less sure when I hear suggestions that postponing the bigger project would be a shattering blow to morale in the Humanities. Even when the building exists, most members of the relevant faculties will continue to be based in colleges, and to work primarily as individual scholars. When they are involved in collaborations, these are often with colleagues in other Divisions (notably Social Studies), or in other universities. If morale is low, this is surely because everyone can see a period of severe austerity coming, in which crucial funding decisions are taken on short-term and narrowly economic reasoning. In this situation the immediate outlook for the Humanities is bleak indeed, as is emphasized by the ludicrous ‘impact’ scheme for the REF, which is set up in such a way as to exclude virtually all the major impacts they could legitimately claim. Some of my colleagues may share my second nightmare, a vision of the future in which attenuated faculties take possession of a handsome set of buildings, only to find that they must make a further round of job cuts in order to pay the space charge. I suppose that in the end I believe that the Humanities need people and libraries first, so that if hard choices have to be made these must be the ultimate priorities.

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How to discipline and silence academics

JØRGEN ØLLGAARD

The university is a foundation stone of democracy. Ideally, it is an institution wholly independent of political and economic interests, whose scholars strive to uncover scientific truths in accordance with their professional and objective convictions. Scholars should be free to voice criticism, to play the devil’s advocate, to speak out against those in power without risking their livelihoods.

The vast majority of scholars believe that these ideals on the whole are mirrored in real-life. They believe that the university constitutes a special environment, one that is particularly resistant to external pressures. A classic example from my own country issues from the period 2000-2003, when the Danish government began implementing its new University Act, a piece of legislation which arguably has made Danish universities the most regulated and most managed in the Western world. Only in North Korea or the Stalinist Eastern bloc republics could one expect anything to be more centrally governed – even the British universities enjoy more autonomy, there being no single legislative act which regulates in such detail from above!

What was strange to observe in this instance was, with a few honest exceptions, the complete failure of Danish academics to react. Those who in general are so inclined on festive occasions to sound off about “academic freedom” were silent, when it was time to voice protests against government’s theft of the independence of the university. This situation reflected a number of factors:

– The Vice-Chancellors – who at that time were elected by the college – were unable to reach common agreement, in the main because the monofaculty institutions were supportive of the reform, and because the Vice-Chancellors took on a defensive stance on tactical grounds for fear of reprisals in the event of their publicly denouncing the responsible Minister, his government and powerful politicians/administrators in general.

– Faculty was divided. Academics have a high degree of self-awareness and are individualists to a man. In an assembly of 100 academics, there will be 101 opinions. Some believed management should be tightened up, whereas their own departments and those of select colleagues ought to be left alone.

Another group was simply disinterested in university politics and put their heads down and hoped that change would not impact on their own personal areas of research. This latter stance combined with the idea that collegial management was a bind: too many meetings, too much talk.

A third group maintained that intervention in university management would prove relatively harmless to the internal academic workings of the university, the institution being considered sufficiently robust, and inertia so deeply rooted, that the academy’s cornerstone activity, the pursuit of scientific knowledge, could hardly be disrupted. Research has its own rationales, by which al-
ternatives would be established allowing the managerial efforts of government to be sidestepped.

From my own perspective — that of the cynical sociologist and journalist — this all seemed naive and defeatist. As things turned out, I was right.

I shall not weary the reader with the finer points of the Danish University Act (anyone interested might like to consult Ingrid Stage’s ‘Lessons from Denmark’, Oxford Magazine, No. 291, 2009). But in short as there are some lessons you can learn from the Danish system: its a wave of legislation, reduced financing and chains of contractual obligations, that have provided government with a series of powerful tools by which to steer the universities.

1. The universities’ system of government has been established by detailed legislation: top-down control with supreme power in the hands of appointed managers and no contributory influence for faculty, who no longer have the power to elect department heads. The Act introduced “politicised” executive boards with external majorities and external chairmen, as well as appointed Vice-Chancellors and faculty and department heads. Power is concentrated solely in the hands of the board and the Vice-Chancellor. The traditional supreme heads. Power is concentrated solely in the hands of the board and the Vice-Chancellor. The traditional supreme governing body, the Senate (Da. konsistorium) has been abolished and replaced by what is termed an “Academic Council”, which has no power in any matter of significance.

2. Contract policy: Universities are legally obliged to enter into contract with the Ministry of Science, Innovation and Technology as regards establishing strategic objectives, success criteria, research priorities, study programmes, etc.

3. Restricted freedom of research (choice) for the individual: the individual scholar enjoys only a narrow choice as regards research topic, but freedom of ‘theory and method’. This limitation is sophisticated insofar as academics may be directed by department heads to perform certain research activities, thereby experiencing restriction as to their freedom of choice. Denmark is the only country to have legislated against freedom of research. While the Danish University Law (§ 17.2) states that the choice of scientific method remains in the hands of the individual scholar, he or she is by no means necessarily sovereign in selecting the research topic, this being the case only where scholars have not been directed to carry out other research or perform contractual tasks. (The statement of this part of the law will soon be softened, though, as the politicians recognize this part as too absurd)

Moreover, research must be carried out within the research-strategic framework of the department, accepted by the department head. Line managers are thus able to freely dictate the kinds of research work scholars are to undertake. Clearly, this has little to do with freedom.

4. All the other initiatives are supported by a large selective redistribution of research money. The governmental plan is to ‘put out to tender’, which in liberal terms basically means competition between institutions and researchers, and in political terms that government may direct research funds as it sees fit. Basic funding has in the main remained frozen at the same level (or a little less) for years.

In parliamentary terms what is interesting is that all these drastic reform measures enjoy wide consensus in the Folketing (Danish parliament), only the smaller left-wing parties having remained sceptical. To attribute these reforms to successive right-wing governments alone would be an error.

The Social Democrats have played along in the soft-core image of Blair’s New Labour. For them, research policy has always been understood as policy on technology, by which technological innovation and the creation of new (industrial) jobs are seen as the prime motors of economic growth, a stance wholly in accordance with that of the industrial trade unions. And they are highly cognisant of the fact that a high-profile ‘support academic freedom’ platform is hardly going to bring in the votes from the broad population.

And here in 2010, the major scandal up to now has been the government’s liberal laissez-faire stance on the University of Copenhagen’s axing of 132 jobs in its Faculty of Nature, this at a time when government otherwise is busy presenting its visions of Denmark as a future provider of “world-class” teaching and scholarship. The government places the blame for redundancies squarely at the feet of the university itself, referring to “autonomy”. The reality of the matter is its autonomy to handle limited budgets and do the cutting. By channeling research funding into politically selected “areas of focus”, government has slowly tightened the screws on basic funding earmarked for day-to-day running. This scandalous state of affairs has yet to find public exposure: protests have been relatively mild, and governing boards, Vice-Chancellors and faculty have been cowed into submission.

With the tools mentioned above, the politicians possess both the structure and the instruments by which to control university activities strategically with a hard hand — which is exactly what they are doing. Thus, Denmark has become a European spearhead regarding political research management and a horror-scenario for others (for an international comparison see http://www.forskerforum.dk/downloads/ff-203.pdf or http://www.jorgen-ollgaard.dk/?p=101). And herewith a word of warning: there are politicians and administrators out there who would dearly love to copy the Danish model in their own countries.

Danish academic society has become increasingly disciplined in its behaviour since the initial legislation of 2003 and subsequent measures adopted in 2007 (e.g. mergers between universities and government research institutes (GRIs)). In practice, little ever surfaces about the political dictates, mainly because scholars are reticent about voicing dissent in public for fear of jeopardising career opportunities. Basically, scholars simply tend to adjust after negotiation. This is combined with a belief in reason; not that it’s a simple question of power, not yours alone, but also for the common good in the democratic society.
But in practice, arguments along the lines of staff being wise to stick to departmental research strategies defined at managerial level are usually quite effective. This is a form of discreet research management, fostered by strategies financially supported by government and implemented partly in the form of so-called ‘public authority tasks’ which universities from the mergers in 2007 are obliged to carry out for government. This re-form contributes to making the university more attached to applied topics, and is in that way “a trojan horse” in the autonomy.

Protests from rank-and-file faculty are few and far between: critics, who are typically anonymous, claim they have been “bullied into silence”. This makes the work of the journalist endeavouring to investigate such matters that much more difficult, a claim readily confirmed by my own personal experience. Interviews are punctuated by the sounds of desperately creaking brains. Highly qualified, well-paid scholars do not make public statements as to issues of conflict within the academy or their fields of research before the question has been allowed to wash through the neural system: issues are subjected to stringent strategic evaluation with the tactical aim of weighing up possible gains against the risks of becoming unpopular or even non-grata in respect of their immediate superiors, research bureaucrats (responsible for dishing out crucial funding) or the political powers that be. The strain of mental effort this requires is often to be measured in decibels.

In other cases, interviews are approached from another angle: I’m given two stories, one to be quoted, the other a personal assessment strictly off the record. This shows how vulnerable the so-called independent university is, when put under pressure from outside. Which leads me to one of my favourite quotations:

“The academic ethos embodies the insight that science cannot be expected to ‘speak truth to power’ unless power is forbidden to talk back” (Ziman: “Real Science”, p.162).

Unfortunately, this frontier of academic independence and autonomy has been given up to intruders, with “postmodern science” (Ziman) as a consequence or what critical economists/sociologists call “Real Science”.

The universities of course have obligations to move in time to changes in society, in the name of the common good. The depressing conclusion though is that it would be folly to allow external forces to gain direct control of our institutions’ scholarly practice, decision-making and internal modi vivendi. We must be fully aware that outside forces are not acting for the good of the university as such, but rather for their own special interests, be they commercially oriented, political or administrative. The university relinquishes, or is forced to relinquish, power, as in Denmark where:

(i) a majority of its board members represent outside interests (the Act dictates that members from outside the university must be in the majority!);

(ii) the chairman typically is a retired captain of industry (who never attended university!);

(iii) faculty is deprived of all influence as to important issues of strategy and financing (because management is appointed from above rather than being elected, and because academic organs without exception are little more than cartoons—bereft of any real power, management always having the final say!), the consequences for academic liberty, and for critical debate, will be drastic indeed.

* * *

All this is clearly demonstrated in Denmark today, where an international evaluation-committee (with members related to the conservative ‘think-tank’ OECD) recently assessed the Danish University Act, unleashing harsh criticism between the lines of certain aspects of the legislation. The evaluation had to manoeuvre by comparing the situation to a minimum of the classic libertarian university model. On codetermination and academic freedom the Socratic exercise and words from the committee were:

“More autonomy of the universities has been achieved and the decision-making capacity of universities has been improved. However, this development has been accompanied by a dense set of rules and regulations, many of them too detailed... However, neither the Act nor the explanatory notes contain a general statement in support of codetermination, and the universities have not implemented codetermination to a satisfactory extent. In order to do justice to Danish democratic traditions and the spirit of the Act as regards academic staff and students’ involvement in relevant decision-making processes and at the same time making this a general responsibility for the universities...” (Recommendations, p.10).

Thus, criticism aimed by rank-and-file faculty seems to find support in the report.

And how does the conservative government and the Socialdemocrat respond to all this? Well, mostly their reaction has been to raise the possibility of minor adjustments to the legislation (§17.2). However, the main pillars of the Act (dictating a majority of external players on the board, appointed Vice-Chancellors and heads of department, little real influence for rank-and-file faculty, etc.) will remain intact. The right to manage, which government and politicians has arrogated to themselves, is not for debate.

Such is the logic of power: once external powerful players have gained influence they are hardly likely to surrender it again. For external players the actions of a public university will never be fully satisfactory.

NOTICE

The Editors of the Oxford Magazine regret that they cannot publish any material submitted to them anonymously. If the author requests publication on the basis that the author’s name and university address be withheld from the readership, the Editors will consider the reasons given and in their discretion may publish on that basis; otherwise the material will be returned to the author.