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Hanne Kvilhaugsvik

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Bridging higher education and the world of work? Employer panels in Nordic university governance

Hanne Kvilhaugsvik

Department of Administration and Organisation Theory, University of Bergen, Bergen Norway

ABSTRACT

Universities are increasingly expected to cooperate with society and the world of work to ensure relevant higher education. One example is the introduction of mandated employer panels, where external members are brought in to advise universities on study programmes. Building on research on third mission activities, this article examines employer panels' role in university governance through a comparative case study of two Danish and two Norwegian employer panels. The article employs a historical-institutionalist approach emphasising path dependency and embedded agency and integrates contributions from the welfare state and political economy literature. The empirical material consists of interviews with nine panel members, as well as documents from panel meetings. The article finds similarities in background but differences in the organisation of panels, with more specialisation in Denmark. The cases suggest that the panels can be understood as layers to established cooperation with the world of work, and the findings show an emphasis on shared interests. This is analysed in light of Nordic traditions for coordination, as well as a bridging strategy for university leadership. The article finds that university leadership can shape cooperation by managing recruitment, agendas, and reporting, but the cases also illustrate tensions and possible challenges.

Introduction

Connections between universities, society, and the world of work have become important issues in university governance. Such external relations have been conceptualised in terms of the 'third mission' (Laredo 2007; Pinheiro, Langa, and Pausits 2015a), which highlights universities' external engagement and contribution. Much of the literature on third mission activities has focused on aspects of innovation and commercialisation of research (Laredo 2007; Schnurbus and Edvardsson 2020), often connected to models such as the 'Triple Helix' of academia, industry, and government (Etzkowitz and Zhou 2017) and the 'entrepreneurial university' (Clark 1998, 2004). Furthermore, studies have often focused on connections to the regional economy (Benneworth, de

CONTACT Hanne Kvilhaugsvik hanne.kvilhaugsvik@uib.no Institutt for administrasjon og organisasjonsvitenskap, Universitetet i Bergen, Postboks 7802, Bergen N-5020, Norway

Boer, and Jongbloed 2015; Lebeau and Cochrane 2015; Lehmann et al. 2020). These developments can be understood in light of the knowledge economy agenda, where higher education and research are portrayed as prerequisites for economic growth (Grubb and Lazerson 2004). Still, teaching and education have not received as much attention in research on third mission activities, even though mass higher education can be understood as one of universities' main contributions to society and the world of work (Laredo 2007, 441). Recently, it has been argued that the 'third mission' has been re-conceptualised to refer more specifically to 'relevance' and 'social impact' (Pinheiro, Langa, and Pausits 2015a, 227–228), which suggests that education could become a key issue for universities' external engagement. This article therefore studies universities' cooperation with external actors on relevance in higher education, through a comparative case study of employer panels for universities in Denmark and Norway.

Some key aspects in research on third mission activities are how such cooperation is organised, what kind of units are constructed, and how these are connected to universities' core activities of teaching and research. Pinheiro, Langa, and Pausits argue that universities traditionally have decoupled their third mission activities (2015a, 228), which entails that arrangements like employer panels could have mostly symbolic aspects (Meyer and Rowan 1977), loosely connected to teaching and research. However, Pinheiro, Langa, and Pausits find that there has been a recent move towards infusing third mission units into the core activities (2015b). This suggests that universities may utilise other strategies to manage connections, for instance bridging, which entails controlling or coordinating with external actors (Scott and Davis 2017, 235). This article therefore asks how universities organise cooperation with the world of work on study programmes.

While connections between higher education and employers are not new, the relations can be complicated and characterised by different interests. The inclusion of external actors may also have implications for universities' autonomy (de Boer and Enders 2017), creating conditions for significant tensions in the relationship between higher education and the world of work (Teichler 2015). Several studies have also contrasted the logics of higher education to those of enterprises and the market (e.g. Canhilal, Lepori, and Seeber 2016; Scott and Kirst 2017). The emphasis on employers' needs has also been criticised as part of New Public Management-inspired market-based reforms (Schulze-Cleven and Olson 2017), an instrumental approach to education (Clarke 2018), and neoliberalisation entailing a shift in power balance 'in favour of employers' (Boden and Nedeva 2010). We therefore ask how university leadership seek to manage and align different interests in cooperation with the world of work.

The article is organised in the following way: The first section presents the theoretical perspective, which is based on historical institutionalism. We here emphasise path-dependent patterns of cooperation and embedded agency and draw on features of the welfare state and traditions for coordination. The research design and methods for the study is presented in the next section. The article is based on a comparative case study of four employer panels at one Danish and one Norwegian university, which mostly cover professionally oriented study programmes and were selected as 'most likely' cases for the purpose of the study. The next sections present and discuss the findings,

beginning with the regulatory background of the panels. The last section then compares the main findings and discusses implications.

Theoretical approach

The theoretical approach is based on historical institutionalism (Mahoney and Thelen 2015). Institutions are here defined as the formal and informal rules and practices that guide actors' behaviour (Steinmo, Thelen, and Longstreth 1992; Hall and Taylor 1996; Mahoney and Thelen 2010). In this tradition path dependency has been an important concept highlighting that choices made at the formation of an institution influence further developments and opportunities for change (Fioretos, Falleti, and Sheingate 2016). It is therefore crucial to study the 'legacy of the past' (Peters 2019, 80) and contextual features. Recent contributions also highlight opportunities for gradual changes, such as layering of new arrangements onto existing practices (Mahoney and Thelen 2015). For instance, employer panels could be added as layers to established connections to external actors. The perspective also builds on an understanding of embedded agency, which implies that actors are shaped by institutions and the political context, but also that they can act strategically to pursue interests and initiate changes (Mahoney and Thelen 2010; Hall and Taylor 1996).

At the national level, we highlight two main aspects that we expect to affect panels, the first of which concerns funding. The Nordic countries are examples of the Mass Public model (Ansell 2010), with high levels of public funding, generous benefits for students, and no tuition fees. The state has a relatively strong role in Nordic university governance (Gornitzka, Maassen, and de Boer 2017), and can regulate study programmes through funding and other forms of regulation. In this context higher education could be understood in light of the social democratic welfare state (Esping-Andersen 1990), as expansion and funding have been priorities based on ideals of universal access to education and ensuring full employment (Ahola et al. 2014). However, countries have followed different trajectories for expansion, leading to different perceptions of higher education's relevance. Denmark has experienced soaring expansions in general studies and at universities (Thomsen 2014), leading to an understanding of 'mismatch' to the world of work (Kvalitetsudvalget 2015; Danmarks akkrediteringsinstitution 2015). In contrast, much of the expansion in Norway took place in university colleges and professional study programmes (Vabø and Hovdhaugen 2014), and official reports have found a balance between higher education and the labour market situation (Finansdepartementet 2015). This leads us to expect more detailed regulations of cooperation with the world of work in Denmark compared to Norway.

The second aspect pertains to coordination in the political economy. The Nordic countries are coordinated market economies (Hall and Soskice 2001), with traditions for collective action and a corporatist model of association (Martin and Swank 2012). This entails traditions for coordination and collective preference formation, for instance on education and training systems and labour market policies (Thelen 2014). Accordingly, employers are used to cooperate with the state and emphasise shared interests through peak associations and sector groups, in contrast to liberal market economies where such cooperation is weak. We expect employer panels to be influenced by these

features, in contrast to portrayals of neoliberalisation and market steering in liberal market economies. Denmark has experienced stronger liberalisation and decentralisation in the past decades (Thelen 2014), so we expect a stronger emphasis on local enterprises and segments here, and more tripartite coordination and involvement of peak and labour market organisations in Norway.

At the universities, we highlight university leadership's scope of action concerning organisation and management of employer panels. Universities have gradually been reformed into organisations with stronger hierarchies and more professionalised management (Bleiklie, Enders, and Lepori 2015), which leads us to expect academic leadership to have an influence on employer panels. Furthermore, universities may be conceptualised as institutions with a high level of discretion, which could provide ample opportunities for university leadership to shape employer panels' structure and function, within the national regulations. However, since the 2000s Denmark has experienced sweeping reforms of management and performance, which contributors have characterised as market-based (Wright and Ørberg 2011) and more radical compared to Norway and Sweden (Pinheiro et al. 2019). This suggests stronger hierarchisation and steering of Danish panels. Universities are also organised around disciplines with distinct traditions for teaching and research (Becher and Trowler 2001; Clark 1983), which imply different traditions for connections to employers. The four panels we study in this article mostly cover professional study programmes, where we expect that employer panels can be added as layers to established cooperation.

In light of recent studies on third mission activities we also use the concept of bridging. Scott and Davis define bridging as a tactic organisations use to 'control or in some manner coordinate one's actions with those of formally independent entities' (Scott and Davis 2017, 235). Bridging can include cooperation on common goals and the inclusion of external members *into* an organisation and may be connected to executive leaders or units (Scott and Davis 2017, 235–236), in contrast to strategies where organisations attempt to protect the core from external influence (Scott and Davis 2017, 128). Bridging can have different implications, depending on how cooperation is organised and connected to university leadership. We expect panels organised at universities' institutional level to emphasise strategic, overall issues, while decentralised or specialised panels could be more involved in academic content.

Cooperation can also entail challenges for universities. First, the inclusion of external actors in core activities could imply changes in autonomy, particularly if universities are *required* to cooperate. Second, universities and employers could promote different interests, for instance concerning competences (Scott et al. 2017). Third, universities offer a multitude of study programmes which could connect to a wide range of employers. We expect panel leaders to emphasise management of such challenges, for instance through strategic recruitment and interpretation of suggestions.

The next section proceeds to present the research design and methods.

Research design and methods

The article is based on a comparative case study (George and Bennett 2005; Yin 2018) of employer panels at one Danish and one Norwegian university, which have been anonymised for the study. The universities were selected as most similar cases: they are

comparable in size (more than 10,000 students each), both are located near large cities, and their profiles include professional programmes. The two universities were selected as 'most likely' cases for this study due to their profile and established connections to the world of work. Furthermore, we operationalised universities' organisation and management of employer panels as three dimensions: Composition of panels, agenda-setting, and reports from meetings. Universities' influence was understood as high if they could control all three dimensions, and low if they could not.

Four employer panels were selected within the two universities. The Norwegian university has two large, general panels, and both were therefore included. One panel covers technology and business, while the other comprises education, health, and social science. The Danish university, however, has more than 50 specialised panels. A preliminary mapping of all panels was therefore carried out, based on information on the university's webpages. The strategy for case selection was to choose two typical panels from a disciplinary context with established linkages to the world of work. Panels for technology fulfilled these criteria and two such panels were therefore selected: One panel for a recently established engineering programme, and one for a traditional engineering programme. This selection also allowed for comparison between new and established study programmes. Both panels cover a bachelor and master programme. The selection of these two panels also ensured comparability with the Norwegian university, where one panel covers technology. The panel on education, health, and social science from the Norwegian university was kept to ensure maximum variation.

The study covers the period from 2015 to 2019, as the two Danish panels were first established in 2015 and the Norwegian panels in 2017. The empirical material consists of documents from the national level and the two universities, and nine semi-structured interviews. Data triangulation was essential to study possible tensions and different interests. The documents from the national level include acts and guidelines, while documents from universities include institutions' webpages and documents from panel meetings. A Norwegian evaluation report (Tellmann et al. 2017) and two Danish booklets on employer panels (Danske Universiteter 2011; DEA 2014) were also included as secondary sources.

Furthermore, nine members of the four employer panels were interviewed during spring 2019. Overviews of panel members were openly accessible online, and informants were contacted individually by e-mail. The informants included six internal and three external members (see Table 1). The interviews were individual, except the leader and secretary of Panel 3 who were interviewed together. All interviews were conducted face-to-face, except two informants (S2, Panel 4; E1, Panel 3) who were interviewed by

Table 1. Overview of interviews.

Danish university	Norwegian university
Internal members	
Leader of panel 1, academic staff member (L1, Panel 1)	Leader of panel 3 and 4, institutional leadership (L, Panel 3&4)
Leader of panel 2, academic staff member (L2, Panel 2)	Secretary for panel 3, institutional leadership (S1, Panel 3)
Administrative staff member, faculty level (A1, DK)	Secretary for panel 4, institutional leadership (S2, Panel 4)
External members	
External member of panel 1, local enterprise (E1, Panel 1)	External member of panel 3, local enterprise (E1, Panel 3)
	External member of panel 3, labour market organisation (E2, Panel 3)

phone. The interviews covered organisation and management of panels, recruitment of members, panel meetings and discussions, the purpose of panels, follow-up of suggestions, as well as other connections between universities and the world of work. The interviews lasted approximately 40–60 min and were recorded and transcribed, and quotations were checked by informants. Some informants also provided the author with documents on their organisations' work on employer panels. The interviewees have been anonymised, and external members' job titles have therefore been omitted.

The strategy for analysis of the material was based on process-tracing (Bennett and Checkel 2015), focusing on similarities and differences in regulatory background, panel structures, recruitment of members, agendas, as well as reporting and follow-up after meetings. The next sections present the employer panels and findings from the case studies, beginning with the background of the arrangements and regulations at the national level.

Regulatory background of employer panels

'Employer panels' (*aftagerpanel*) were made mandatory for Danish universities in 2007 as part of a wave of reforms (Ministeriet for Videnskab 2010, 26). The arrangement was included in a revision of the act on universities. In the proposal the arrangement was presented in terms of the need to ensure quality and relevance, as well as increased cooperation with employers (Folketingstidende 2006–07). This could be understood in light of the tremendous increases in enrolment at universities and in general study programmes over the years (Thomsen 2014). The universities were consulted on the revision of the act, and their responses emphasised the need to manage the organisation and work of the panels locally (Folketingstidende 2006–07). The responses also argued that panels should be advisory. Some universities also mentioned that they already had panels in place, which might explain the lack of protest in the responses.

The new and revised act on universities stated that panels must consist of external representatives who are familiar with the area of study and the labour market situation (Universitetsloven 2007, 2019). The mandate further stated: 'The university shall ensure dialogue between the employer panel and the university on the quality of the study programmes and their relevance to society […]' (Universitetsloven 2007). The act specified that panels can make suggestions on 'all questions related to the study programmes', and universities must consult panels on revisions and new study programmes (Universitetsloven 2007). The organisation of the panels was up to the universities, as they had petitioned for in the consultation. Many universities opted for specialised panels connected to study programmes (Danske Universiteter 2011; DEA 2014). Cooperation with the world of work was also included in the national quality assurance (QA) system, and universities must be able to document employer involvement in study programmes.

In Norway, 'Councils for cooperation with the world of work' (*Råd for samarbeid med arbeidslivet*) were introduced in a 2009 white paper (St.meld. nr. 44 (2008–2009)), following reports that emphasised the need for more binding cooperation between higher education institutions (HEIs) and the world of work (e.g. St.meld. nr. 7 (2007–2008)). The white paper reiterated this, and argued that stronger connections could improve the quality and relevance of higher education (St.meld. nr. 44 (2008–2009), 76). The white paper also maintained that 'Publicly funded higher education must be relevant for

future work' (St.meld. nr. 44 (2008–2009), 76). This development can be explained by high public funding and policies for expansion based on welfare state ideals of ensuring access for all qualified applicants (Vabø and Hovdhaugen 2014), leading to high participation and expansion based on applicants' demands. The new panels were intended to promote more structured dialogue on further development of study programmes and continuing education (St.meld. nr. 44 (2008–2009)). The white paper also mentioned the Danish employer panels, which was referred to as a 'good model' (St.meld. nr. 44 (2008–2009), 77).

The Norwegian panels have not been incorporated into the act relating to universities, which only states that HEIs shall cooperate with 'local and regional society and the world of work' (Universitets- og høyskoleloven 2005). Instead, the panels were introduced through Letters of Allocation[1] from the ministry to HEIs. It was specified that HEIs must develop strategies for cooperation and that labour market organisations should be included, but the structure and management were otherwise up to HEIs. The introduction was sluggish: A 2013 audit found that about 20% of the HEIs had not established councils, and about 50% had not developed a strategy as instructed (Riksrevisjonen 2013, 83). A 2017 evaluation report then found that all HEIs had established councils, often in the form of one common panel at the central level (Tellmann et al. 2017). Most panels therefore cover disciplines or the education portfolio as a whole. The report argued that the slow introduction could be explained by HEIs considering alternatives for organisation of the new panels (Tellmann et al. 2017), but it could also suggest that the panels were not a priority. In contrast to the Danish panels there are few requirements for documentation.

The regulatory context shows a similar emphasis on cooperation, but also indicates differences in mandate and requirements. The next sections proceed to present and discuss the findings from the four cases.

Employer panels at a Danish university

The Danish university has more than 50 specialised panels. The mapping showed that they usually consist of 10 external members, a study programme leader who acts as chair, and an internal administrative secretary. The external members are normally recruited from local and regional enterprises, and some panels, mainly within humanities and social sciences, also have members representing public employers. The two employer panels for engineering that we study are part of the Faculty for Technology and Engineering, where specialised panels were introduced in 2015, initially to supplement a common panel and to bring employers closer to the study programmes (A1, DK). Both panels are chaired by study programme leaders, but an informant explained that the panels have been supervised by the faculty level in order to fulfil the documentation requirements in the national QA system (A1, DK). This indicates decentralised management of panels, but also aspects of hierarchical steering.

Composition of panels

The two panels have 7 and 10 external members respectively and hold annual meetings. Panel 1 covers a professional bachelor and master programme in a traditional

engineering discipline with a practical emphasis. The programmes used to be part of an engineering college and several academic staff members have a background from local industry (L1, Panel 1). In contrast, Panel 2 covers an academic bachelor and master programme in a recently established engineering specialisation. There is more variation in enterprises represented in Panel 2, which could reflect the rapid technological advances this younger segment is undergoing.

The external members were invited based on suggestions from the academic staff (L1, Panel 1), and several members represent enterprises with long-standing relations to the university. This can illustrate path dependencies in cooperation with the world of work, with panels as a layer to existing cooperation. Moreover, it suggests decentralised recruitment managed by study programme leaders and academic staff. An administrative employee at the faculty level argued that enterprises were interested in cooperation, as engineering graduates are in high demand: 'That is why we frequently, or regularly, experience that companies contact us, and are eager to join an employer panel and cooperate' (A1, DK). The eagerness to participate could reflect traditions for cooperation, and the statement also introduces shared interests, which suggests that the panels can be used as a bridging strategy.

The external panel members are consistently presented as representatives of enterprises and segments in material from the university. An external member of Panel 1 explained their understanding of their role in the panel: 'I would say that I represent 80% my organisation, and then it is not to be avoided that the last 20%, perhaps, is myself' (E1, DK), and added that their organisation also represents a segment of the regional economy (E1, DK). This understanding of representation can be analysed in terms of coordination and traditions for collective action, as the external members represent more than themselves. The external member of Panel 1 even expressed a sense of obligation to participate:

> And if we as a company do not want to tell the university what we think a candidate should graduate with, well, then who should? So, I thought that it must simply be our duty to let our opinion be known. (E1, Panel 1)

This quotation can be interpreted in light of traditions for coordination, as it emphasises enterprise's 'duty' to participate, rather than interests.

Agendas

The panels' meetings mostly concern academic content, such as admission and drop-out numbers, course content, and further development of the profile. Minutes from meetings also show that academic staff members and students participate and present projects, which indicates that panels are connected to core activities of teaching and research. The informants explained that study programme leaders set the agenda, but there are some restrictions: The minutes show common topics addressed by all panels at the faculty, particularly in the first meetings, and some issues are referred to as priorities set by the faculty or university leadership, for instance internationalisation.

The two panels are connected to study programmes with different profiles, which has implications for their agendas. The programmes associated with Panel 1 include projects and training placements, which the study programme leader emphasised as important

connections to the world of work: 'The [student] projects are carried out with enterprises, and that is also a way for us to ensure that the students we educate match what there is need for in the enterprises[.]' (L1, Panel 1). This statement reiterates the established connections and suggests that enterprises already are familiar with content and course units. The description of 'match' also indicates an aim to coordinate on issues of academic content. A pronounced theme for the panel is recruitment of students. Candidates are in high demand, so the study programme and enterprises have a shared interest in increased admission. However, candidates with a bachelor's degree are sought-after by enterprises, while the university wants to recruit these candidates to master programmes. Minutes from a panel meeting state that the drop-out rate is quite high as students 'find employment' after applying to the programmes (Minutes, 2016 meeting). This issue exemplifies possible tensions in cooperation between universities and the world of work, as the organisations may promote different interests. As the national regulation requires universities to document employer involvement, panels could favour enterprises' interests rather than universities.

The agendas for Panel 2 reflect that the study programmes were established more recently, and a key issue is further development of the profile. The study programme leader argued that the employer panel has been important for their work on this aspect (L2, Panel 2), both to satisfy formal requirements for establishing the programme and for further work. The informant explained:

> By including [a segment] in the employer panel, you can focus a bit on the fact that [this] is also an element in our education. So, in that way I use the employer panel a bit like a lever to shift the focus in the education. (L2, Panel 2)

This statement highlights the study programme leaders' opportunities to shape recruitment and agendas for the panel, particularly through the informant's choice of pronouns. The informant's analogy of a 'lever' even indicates that panels could be a resource for university leadership rather than a liability, in contrast to portrayals of arrangements that are inflicted upon universities.

Reporting

Panel meetings are summarised in detailed minutes taken by the administrative secretary. These documents are central to understand management of the panels as they summarise discussions and indicate follow-up of suggestions. An informant explained that all documents associated with panel meetings are published on the university's webpage in order to fulfil the requirement of documentation on employer involvement (A1, DK). The informants also described routines for approval of minutes by the external members, which entails some restrictions for study programme leaders' management of panels.

The minutes shows a wide range of suggestions from external members – from access to specific software to composition of courses in the study programmes. One example can be found in a statement by the external member of Panel 1:

> And I thought one had begun to remove too much theory from the education, because there were so many other possible courses one wanted to include [instead]. (E1, Panel 1)

This statement illustrates that universities and employers can prioritise different aspects. The minutes from this panel's meetings also quote external members as highlighting the

need for more of specific courses, as well as 'a little of everything' (Minutes, 2017 meeting).

The manifold suggestions highlight issues of influence and autonomy. In the interviews, the study programme leaders highlighted the need to interpret suggestions, as recommendations could be contradictory. The internal members also emphasised possible tensions between presenting suggestions to fulfil formal requirements and maintaining the *advisory* role of the panels. This can for instance be seen in a statement by the study programme leader of Panel 2 on influence:

> And [it is also about] ensuring two-way communication, so that [panel members] sense that they can have an influence, and at the same time that we get an impression of how we should, maybe, adjust our content to make it better fit the companies. (L2, Panel 2)

This quotation illustrates shared interest in coordination, but also ambiguities in the panels' advisory role. Changes in academic content are still mainly up to the study boards, although employer involvement must be documented. There are few signs of specific changes made after panels' recommendations so far, which could reflect that decisions are made by other units or by the fact that the specialised panels still are relatively new.

Employer panels at a Norwegian university

The Norwegian university has two panels that were established in 2018. Cooperation with the world of work is emphasised in the university's strategy, and the informants from the university described the employer panels as a priority. The panels are organised at the institutional level as advisory units to the rector, who chairs the meetings and acts as link to the university board.

Composition of panels

The university leadership decided to establish two specialised panels rather than one common, as most Norwegian HEIs have settled on. An informant explained that this was based on their understanding of the private sector as 'more driven by economic growth', while the public sector emphasised 'the society' (S1, Panel 3). This suggests an understanding of different interests in these two sectors, which could better be accommodated by two panels. Two panels could also allow for more targeted discussions on study programmes and academic content. This structure illustrates university leadership's room to shape employer panels, as their solution goes beyond the minimum requirement.

The two employer panels have 15 external and 5 internal members each. In the interviews, the informants from the university emphasised strategic recruitment of external members. Panel 3 covers the private sector, and the members mostly represent local and regional enterprises. The university leadership aimed to find external members who could 'reflect the private sector' associated with the university's study programmes (L, Panel 3&4) and represent more than an individual enterprise and their specific needs (S1, Panel 3). This indicates an aim for broad representation, which could be interpreted in light of traditions for coordination and collective preference formation.

Panel 4 covers study programmes within education, health, and society, and most external members represent municipalities, counties, health services, and agencies. The secretary for the panel stated that they recruited members with relevant practical experience (S2, Panel 4), which reflects that this panel covers professionally oriented study programmes. Additionally, both panels show features of corporatism, as they include external members representing labour market organisations. An external member (E2, Panel 3) also stated that the labour market organisations had participated actively in work on employer panels at the national level, based on traditions for collective action and cooperation on vocational education and training.

The panels build on long-standing relations to the world of work, particularly to local and regional employers. One external member (E1, Panel 3) described an established cooperation between the government, industry, and academia. This informant further added: 'This is a new group, but [such cooperation] is not completely new' (E1, Panel 3). The university has long traditions for professionally oriented study programmes, which include training placements and student projects in cooperation with employers, and both informants from the university and external members described a sense of trust and a mutual need to keep informed. These aspects suggest that employer panels can be added as layers to established cooperation between the university and employers, even reinforcing such connections.

Agendas

The agendas for panel meetings include issues such as continuing education, the university's profile, and initiatives on innovation and cooperation with companies. These issues are connected to the university's strategic initiatives, which suggests that the leadership have aimed to shape the panels to the university's priorities. Informants explained that university leadership set the agenda and that they intend to include issues suggested by external members. The university leadership were familiar with criticism of employer panels being decoupled from education, and the leader emphasised that they wanted to avoid 'nebulous' discussions (L, Panel 3&4).

The university and organisations involved have shared interests on several of the key issues. An external member even exemplified the shared interest in continuing education as an important reason for participating in the panel (E1, Panel 3). The university leadership also described the university as an actor with a key role in regional development (L, Panel 3&4), which the material suggests is favourable to the involved organisations as well. The secretary of Panel 3 explained it this way:

> Most of [the external members] have a regional foundation. Even though they are big companies, they have a regional foundation – they do want to promote the university. (S1, Panel 3)

This can be interpreted in terms of bridging, as the university leadership manage the agenda, and the involved parties can use the panels to coordinate on common issues.

The emphasis on regional development and continuing education could also be explained by aspects of the university's history. The university has its roots in university colleges, including 'district colleges', which were established as alternatives to the universities (Jerdal 2002). These HEIs emphasised connections to the regional society and world

of work from the beginning, and the district colleges even had connections to the county level, with regional actors participating in the college boards (Jerdal 2002). This background illustrates that several Norwegian HEIs have long traditions for involvement with the world of work and society, both in professional education and at the institutional level. The emphasis on regional development suggests that employer panels could be layered onto these traditions.

Reporting

While the informants mostly emphasised coordination and shared interests, there are also aspects that suggest tensions. This was most prominent in interviews with internal members, who discussed possible challenges. An example can be seen in this statement from the secretary for Panel 4:

> We wanted to have external members who were not just absorbed in their own details but were able to take a broader perspective, someone who also represented a field that was interesting to us, and who were able to and interested in helping us become better. (S2, Panel 4)

This quotation suggests that the university leadership wanted to avoid calls for tailoring and instead focus on broader issues. This could be interpreted in light of features of the political economy, as 'broader perspectives' are more in line with traditions for coordination and collective action (Martin and Swank 2012).

The informants also mentioned tensions concerning the panels' role in university governance. When asked about the panels' influence, the secretary for Panel 4 answered:

> We have stressed that the two councils are *advisory* units to the rector. So, the idea is not that the panel members are going to have direct influence, as panel members, on deans or study programmes or individuals. (S2, Panel 4)

The emphasis on 'advisory' units highlights the university leadership's role in managing advice. There are currently no direct requirements to report or document suggestions, so the university leadership's scope of action is relatively wide. The leader of the panels also argued that the university must maintain its identity in cooperation with employers: [We] always have to be like a critical friend' (L, Panel 3&4). Still, the employer panels were intended to lead to changes in study programmes, and external members might expect a more prominent role than the informants from the university described. For instance, one external member argued that: '[The industry in our area] has no interest in participating in a council where nothing happens' (E1, Panel 3). The informant here emphasises that external members represent more than individual enterprises, and the quotation suggests that they expect to have an influence, particularly when they are invited to represent broad interests.

Concluding discussion

Employer panels are examples of a renewed emphasis on universities' external relations and the relevance of higher education. This article has studied how universities organise cooperation on study programmes with the world of work, through case studies of two Danish and two Norwegian employer panels. In this section, we will compare and discuss the main findings, which are summarised in Table 2, and address the implications of the study.

Table 2. Organisation and management of employer panels at the Danish and Norwegian university.

	Danish university	Norwegian university
Regulation	In act on universities	Originally through allocation letters
Formal role	Advisory to study programme	Advisory to rector
Level	Study programme	Central level
Number of panels	50+	2
Size	Around 10 external and 2 internal members	15 external and 5 internal members
External members	Mostly enterprises	Enterprises, public organisations, labour market organisations

Employer panels were introduced around the same time in Denmark and Norway, with the need for improved relevance and cooperation with the world of work as important arguments in both countries. This might be explained by the massive expansion of higher education over the past decades, which has been resource-demanding for countries with high public funding. In the Nordic context expansion has also mostly been driven by applicants' demands, based on welfare state ideals of universal access. Improved relevance and connections to employers could be understood as a strategy to ensure that society still benefits from the high public spending and that the expanded higher education systems contribute to full employment. The welfare state literature has not been utilised often in studies on higher education, but the background of employer panels suggests that it could be purposeful to include such perspectives.

However, the regulatory background also shows differences in university leadership's opportunities to manage panels. In Denmark, the panels are regulated through the act on universities and QA regulations demand that universities document employer involvement in study programmes. The Norwegian panels are regulated in less detail, with an emphasis on dialogue and strategy documents. These differences could be understood in light of contrasts in recent reforms of university governance and the expansion trajectories, as soaring enrolment in general studies and at universities in Denmark led to an understanding of 'mismatch' and lack of relevance. These issues have been less prominent in Norway, which might explain why the panels here do not target study programmes to the same extent. This suggests that arrangements to improve relevance and cooperation with the world of work could be understood in light of national expansion trajectories.

At the universities, the employer panels are chaired and managed by university leadership. The findings show that the leadership handled recruitment of external members, building on existing connections to the world of work. This illustrates panel leaders' scope to shape panels by appointing representatives who are already familiar with the study programmes. These aspects also suggest layering onto established connections to the world of work, in line with our expectations to the four panels as 'most likely' cases. We also found that the external members were understood as representatives of segments and broader interests, although the findings indicate stronger decentralisation in Denmark and tripartite cooperation with labour market organisations in Norway. The cases thereby provide contrasts to common portrayals of cooperation with employers as neoliberalisation. The Nordic context has distinct features which are not generalisable to Anglo-Saxon countries, but the emphasis on panels as layers to established connections to employers could be relevant to other contexts. Further studies on higher education's relations to the world of work could also employ political economy literature to compare liberal and coordinated market economies.

A main difference between the Danish and Norwegian universities concerns the structure, with many specialised, decentralised panels in the first case, and large general panels at the institutional level in the latter. This could be explained by differences in regulations, but the findings also suggest that the structure was shaped by university leadership, with different implications for the panels' work. Stronger connections to study programmes in the Danish cases indicate more opportunities for enterprises to have an influence on academic content. However, the multitude of decentralised panels could also challenge the institutional leadership's capacity to manage the university's cooperation with the world of work as a whole. In contrast, the Norwegian panels are close to the rector and leadership at the institutional level, including the university board. External members of such panels could impact on more overall, strategic initiatives at the university, beyond minor adjustments in course content. In this way the cases can illustrate how third mission units could be connected to core activities at universities (Pinheiro, Langa, and Pausits 2015b), both in study programmes and at the institutional level.

When it comes to the panels work the findings suggest that the agendas and reporting are managed by university leadership. The cases do show some differences here, with more restrictions for panel leaders of the specialised Danish panels, which indicate stronger hierarchisation and steering. Overall, university leadership at both universities were mostly positive and the material shows few signs of resistance. This could be explained by the university leadership's opportunities to manage the panels and by our case selection strategy. Another explanation could be that the Nordic traditions for coordination and collective action shape an understanding of the panels as layers to traditions for cooperation, rather than foreboding impositions.

The cases also suggest that the employer panels address issues concerning academic content, including continuing education and student recruitment. We have analysed this in terms of shared interests between universities and the world of work, based on features of the Nordic context and the professional profile of study programmes. Consequently, we argue that the panels could be understood as a bridging strategy where external members are invited into the universities to coordinate on issues that concern both parties. The findings also suggest that this strategy could be a resource for university leadership. However, we have also discussed tensions and challenges concerning the role of employer panels in university governance. We have highlighted ambiguity in the panels' advisory role, which could have implications for universities' autonomy over study programmes. However, from a historical-institutionalist perspective it could be argued that ambiguous regulations provide more opportunities for university leadership to manage the bridges to the world of work.

Note

1. A Letter of Allocation is a steering document from a ministry to an agency, including HEIs, and includes information about funding, priorities, and performance targets.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

Hanne Kvilhaugsvik is a PhD candidate at the Department of Administration and Organisation Theory, University of Bergen, Norway. Her research interests are focused on higher education governance, relations between higher education and the world of work, and institutional theory.

ORCID

Hanne Kvilhaugsvik http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8854-7681

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