

Scandinavian Higher Education Governance – Pursuing Similar Goals through Different Organizational Arrangements

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Introduction

The three Scandinavian countries – Denmark, Norway and Sweden – have a lot in common when considered as political entities. As unitary, parliamentary democracies with constitutional monarchs as heads of state, their overall political regimes have a number of basic characteristics in common. The fact that they also represent the archetypical examples of universal welfare states (a.k.a. “The Scandinavian Model”) that extend inclusive cradle to grave public services to the entire population, and are among the most prosperous and peaceful countries in the world, add to this impression of three almost identical polities and societies. Even the languages are so similar that Danes, Norwegians and Swedes understand one another when they speak their respective mother tongues.

Yet when one looks more closely at the three countries, important differences emerge (Kogan et al. 2006, Hansen 2011). Thus, in spite of the similarities, the idea that the Scandinavian politico-administrative systems represent one common model with characteristics that clearly distinguish them from those of other European countries is contested. In this paper, we raise the issue of similarities and differences among the higher education (HE) governance systems of the three Scandinavian countries as three questions. 1) What are the differences and similarities among the three countries? 2) How can the similarities and differences be explained? 3) Are the similarities strong enough to justify grouping them together under the common label of a Scandinavian model of HE governance?

These questions are huge and raise a number of issues. Thus, clear delimitations and conceptual clarification is required as to the characteristics that we consider essential in distinguishing specific types or models of governance systems. We shall therefore look at the following aspects of our dependent variable, the governance systems: a) central government agencies, their differentiation and specialization; b) governance instruments regulating the relationship between central government and individual institutions such as formal autonomy, evaluation and funding systems; and c) institutional level governance such as governing bodies, leadership and participatory arrangements including external stakeholders. These aspects have been chosen because they are seen as core elements both in public governance reforms the last decades, and in reforming public higher education systems in Scandinavia (as well as in Western Europe in General) (Bleiklie et al. 2017; Kogan et al. 2006; Paradeise et al. 2009).

We shall then seek to explain the observed differences and similarities in terms of two sets of independent variables defined by two theoretical perspectives. The first focuses on partisan politics and the second on the effects of politico-administrative regimes on HE policies.

This article contributes to a growing body of literature about Scandinavian higher education, which has developed and diversified from single country case studies to more comparatively oriented contributions on a growing number of aspects in HE governance in the Scandinavian countries. (Bleiklie 1994, Bauer, Askling, Marton and Marton 1999, Kim 2002, Bleiklie et al. 2000, Bleiklie 2009, Ahola, Hedmo, Thomsen and Vabø 2014, Børjesson, Ahola, Helland and Thomsen 2014, Christensen and Gornitzka 2017, Schmidt 2017). It is also inspired by the more established tradition of studies of Scandinavian welfare states and the discussion about the Scandinavian Welfare State Model (Esping-Andersen 1999). There are several reasons for undertaking analyses of Scandinavian HE with this historical background in mind. First of all the last fifty years public HE has grown and transformed from an elite to a mass education system. One implication is that HE has become an increasingly important tool for socio-economic redistribution (Ansell 2013). Close to fifty percent of new generations now have some form of higher education, and access to higher education is of crucial importance to a person's future on the labor market. The economy in turn is becoming more dependent on a highly qualified labor force, on its ability to use and exploit research based products and on research training that enable workers to engage in research based product development and innovation. Higher education is therefore a policy sector of strategic importance to welfare policy, economic policy and the future of the advanced Scandinavian welfare states considering the fact that there is a clear correlation between the level of education in a country and the economic prosperity, social wellbeing and happiness enjoyed by its population (Beramendi et al. 2015). Finally, this is a field of study that has been offered relatively little attention by students of public policy and administration. Higher education offers in addition a strategically important testing ground for studying the interaction of democratic politics and administrative actors and processes in the face of a public sector that has expanded and changed dramatically during the last decades. By applying and scrutinizing systematically the effect of partisan politics and politico-administrative regimes, we bring together two perspectives that to our knowledge seldom have been brought together. This makes it possible to assess how political actors and administrative systems and traditions together shape the characteristics and development of HE governance arrangements.

We shall first present the two theoretical perspectives. Then we will briefly present the HE sectors of the three countries before we identify similarities and differences of their governance systems as they have evolved the last 10-20 years. The data is based on a variety of sources, ranging from policy documents, evaluations and commission reports to various types of secondary data collected by the authors through various research projects, supplemented by published articles and books. This section is followed by an analysis were

we ask to what extent the similarities can be seen as results of partisan politics or as products of politico-administrative regimes; i.e. relatively stable, institutionalized arrangements that at critical junctures may open up for actors to shape or reshape them. Finally, we will draw our conclusion regarding the applicability and relevance of the concept of a Scandinavian model of higher education governance.

Theoretical Perspectives

Partisan politics and actor constellations

The first perspective focuses on partisan politics, where policy outcomes are considered products of actor choice. The role of partisan politics in shaping public policy attributes is of central importance to the ideological differences between groups within society and the parties that represent these groups. The left-right dimension, according to which differing class interests are seen as pivotal and as bearers of clear ideological stances, is regarded as critical and policy output depends on the partisan composition of government. This view has been challenged by new strands of research, which have emphasized various extensions of the old partisan politics argument. One strand is related to the effects of electoral changes on party policy positions. Electoral constituencies have changed and do not correspond to those of the industrial age anymore (Beramendi et al. 2015). Second, there is the role of context, in the form of electoral institutions, party competition and the configuration of party systems. Various contributions have shown that the institutional context, party systems and party competition matter, and that differences among political systems and structures are likely to affect partisan political dynamics (Iversen and Soskice 2006).

The Scandinavian countries have been characterized by a peculiar party configuration, the five-party format based on proportional representation, and the dominance of social democratic parties (Demker and Svåsand, 2005, Bergman and Strøm, 2011, Arter, 2008). The Scandinavian social democratic parties have had the most consistent record of electoral success in Europe (Berman 2006). The high point was reached in the post-war period in the 1950s and 60s. In the 1970s and 80s this position eroded. The fact that the voters were spread across five different parties prompted collaboration among political elites and the development of a tradition of consensus politics. .

The three countries have developed sizeable and inclusive public HE systems combining high public investments and low private costs. Comparing the effect of electoral systems, Ansell (2013,150) found that political parties in majoritarian electoral systems (Australia, Canada, France, UK, USA) are quite polarized in a pattern where leftist parties favor expansion and redistribution, while rightist parties oppose both. Proportional systems (Germany, Ireland,

Norway, Sweden and Switzerland) on the other hand, seem to have a moderating effect in the sense that the association between educational policy preferences and party ideology is absent. The difference between the policy preferences of major political parties is much smaller. In Germany and particularly Norway and Sweden there is no relationship between party preferences regarding education and redistribution. Ansell (2013) shows that actual party preferences depend heavily on the institutional context. Whether leftist parties favor or oppose the allocation of public resources to HE, depends on the structure of the HE system (mass v. elite system) in a country. In a mass university system, leftist parties favor increased spending on tertiary education, because it has a redistributive effect. This in turn forms a set of conditions where the attitudes of actors involved in partisan politics are determined by how HE, as a forceful tool of socio-economic redistribution, affects major social interests.

Although the relationship between level of spending, access and by implication, party positions, is somewhat more complex than indicated by Ansell (cf. Jungblut 2014), it bears out the importance of the institutional context in order to understand how governance arrangements are developed. The partisan politics literature does not offer much attention to governance arrangements and the relationship between partisan positions and governance reforms in HE. One assumption that has been presented regarding governance reforms of mass HE is this: (A1) Political parties on the right tend to promote market-oriented reforms, while parties on the left are likely to support corporate-pluralist reforms, including multiple internal and external stakeholders in decision processes (Jungblut 2014).

The Scandinavian countries are typical representatives of the Mass Public Model, because the support for social democratic parties, combined with relatively small social differences and proportional electoral systems have provided favorable conditions for this model. In short, major interest groups and the political parties representing them add up to broad coalitions that favor expansion. The strength of the partisan politics approach to the study of political outcomes is its focus on political actors as agents of institutional change. One weakness or blind spot is that it does not recognize the significance of the administrative apparatus. Partisan politics is about winning elections, forming governments and making political decisions. There has been little interest in and focus on how decisions are made in political institutions, how such decisions are prepared, interpreted and implemented, but perhaps this is about to change. "New" partisan politics is paying more attention to context (Beramendi et al. 2015). In the Scandinavian countries, large public sectors produce institutional conditions for maintaining cross-class coalitions, and actor constellations also feature bureaucrats and civil servants of various sorts. There is much to suggest that cross-class solidarity and a large public HE sector produce mutually reinforcing structures and relationships over time (Beramendi et al. 2015). This give reasons to suggest an alternative assumption (A2): Scandinavian HE governance reform policies do not reflect clear partisan preferences. One reason may be that the tradition of consensus politics is reflected in relatively stable

compromises that tend to remain in spite of shifting parliamentary majorities and party composition of governments.

The assumptions made about actor behavior are based on statistical data on voter preferences and educational spending from large samples. Assumptions about political processes are in turn based on statistical patterns of outcomes. We know little about the actual processes themselves, about how outputs are transformed to outcomes. It is for instance a presumption that policies are made by political parties to conform to what they assume are the preferences of their constituencies. Below we will present a perspective that does two things: It focuses on different aspects of the political system compared to the partisan politics perspective, and it focuses on relatively stable structural characteristics of these systems, what is known as politico-administrative regimes (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004). We bring this literature together with historical institutionalism, focusing on how the dynamics within politico-administrative regimes and actor constellations in decision-making produce change (Thelen 2004). This perspective brings together the empirical study of policy choice and path dependencies. The impact of partisan politics varies over time. In times of path formation, existing regimes find themselves at critical junctures that open up a wider space for partisan politics and political agency than in times of path stability (Pierson 2004). An alternative reason to assume that HE governance policies in Scandinavia do not reflect party preferences is that higher education policy making is still relatively insulated from partisan “high” politics and mainly the domain of senior civil servants and prominent academics (Bleiklie and Michelsen 2013). This brings us to the second perspective suggested above.

Politico-administrative regimes and regime dynamics

The politico-administrative regime approach, with its focus on the impact on administrative reform trajectories, has won increasing prominence in the public administration field (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004). Basically, it is argued that politico-administrative systems have the potential to shaping administrative reform trajectories (Knill 1998, Christensen and Lægreid 2003, Verhoest et al 2010, Painter and Peters 2010). As such, they constrain and enable political choice. The first generation of administrative reform studies made distinctions between trailblazers and policy laggards, closing in on significant differences between radical and early Anglo-Saxon reformers and far more hesitant continental European latecomers (Kickert 2011, Hansen 2011). In the second generation studies, variations in reform trajectories were related to two different administrative traditions or politico-administrative regimes; each with their own set of values and assumptions; that of the “*Public interest*” and that of the “*Rechtsstaat*” (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004). The Anglo-Saxon *Public interest* model assigns a less prominent role to the state, emphasizes political rather than legal accountability mechanisms, as well as market mechanisms, and favors a general reduction of public sector distinctiveness. The *Rechtsstaat* model considers the state as an integrating force, focused on

the preparation and enforcement of law, with a bureaucracy that emphasizes rule-following and legal control. Still, new elements have been imposed in the form of budget controls in order to move the civil service in the direction of performance budgeting, strategic planning, and managerial modernization. The third generation studies have provided a more nuanced picture, expanding on these classifications. In some contributions focusing on administrative traditions, the Scandinavian countries have been presented as representatives of a distinct politico-administrative regime (Peters 2008, Painter and Peters 2010: 20); the Scandinavian model. The notion of a *Scandinavian model* or tradition is not well developed in the literature. The different Scandinavian countries also seem to differ widely (Peters 2001, Hansen 2011), but in general they combine the *Rechtsstaat* orientation towards the law with a strong universal welfare orientation (Painter and Peters 2010). Scandinavian countries are unitary states, centralized yet also decentralized (Premfors 2003, Baldersheim and Rose 2010). In addition, state-society relations are characterized by corporatism, extensive participatory networks and a strong welfare orientation with extensive commitments to equity and equality (Painter and Peters 2010, Peters 2001). They are considered as consensual and decentralized countries with a distinct policy style and reform trajectory characterized by bargaining and incrementalism. Consensus politics is permeated by bargaining with many opportunities for a variety of actors to influence policies as well as many veto points. Thus, a connection could be made between regime characteristics and incremental reform processes (Lijphard 1999).

However, a recent test of structural approaches in a comparative study of HE reform policies in seven European countries, suggests a more nuanced picture (Bleiklie and Michelsen 2013). The results demonstrated that there is no straightforward unequivocal relationship between politico-administrative regimes and reform activity, and that each regime offers possible paths to high as well as to low reform activity. We concluded that a politico-administrative regime offers different sets of options for reform processes that may limit or be exploited by actors who may want to promote, slow down or prevent reforms from being introduced.

Policy sector characteristics and regime characteristics could be explored in a similar manner. This path leads towards exploring HE policy sector dynamics and structures. Policies, institutional set-ups and structures vary within a particular country, albeit to a different extent and remain lodged in different set-ups, norms and governance traditions (Peters 2010, Lodge 2010). HE and universities in particular have been perceived historically as a specific type of sector. Comparative studies of HE policies and regimes indicate that the policy field has not been strongly contested in many countries. Changes in the political composition of parliaments and executives have only occasionally led to noticeable policy change (Kogan et al. 2006). This might be taken as an indicator of the relative insulation of the HE policy sectors from national "high politics". A technical low conflict definition of an issue or a policy field allows delegation of authority to the administrative apparatus and corporatist networks. Still there is much to suggest that HE has evolved into a testing ground for administrative reform policies, although arguably under peculiar conditions offered by this specific policy sector

(Ferlie et al. 2009). As the HE sector has grown in size and consumes an increasing share of public budgets, politicians have become more interested in the sector and the emphasis on integrating HE and research in the economy as a source of economic growth and innovation has increased accordingly (Bleiklie and Byrkjeflot 2002, Nowotny et al. 2001). Still, administrative policies seem to remain the main habitat of the HE policy sector. The general expectation based on the regime perspective is thus suggested by the following assumption (A3): Higher education governance policies in Scandinavia will be quite similar, particularly in terms of how they might affect arrangements that are considered core aspects of established welfare state traditions such as: a) broad access and participation, and b) established corporatist-pluralist governance patterns.

The Scandinavian countries offer a nice possibility for within regime comparison at the sector level. In what sense can we argue that the Scandinavian countries belong to the same regime? To what extent do the HE sectors appear to reflect characteristics of the national politico-administrative regimes?

The regime literature ends up observing how policies vary across regime types, and how these variations can be explained by specific structural conditions that represent different opportunities and constraints for policy change and reform, such as high or low levels of reform activity. If we are correct in assuming that actors can take advantage of the opportunities in different ways, we need to know more about the actors and how they make their choices. Historical institutional approaches address these questions by focusing on actual policy making processes and the actors who in practice shape the decisions that are made. Furthermore, historical institutionalism focuses on how present policies and the actors are affected and constrained by existing institutional arrangements. Historical institutionalism emphasizes the stability of institutional arrangements – which often explains why national HE systems and individual institutions develop peculiarities that tend to remain stable over long periods of time explained by “path dependency” (Streeck and Thelen 2005, Pierson 2004). Existing arrangements may change, however, and historical institutionalism has developed ways in which both drastic, abrupt change and gradual change processes can be explained. We will focus on the former because it is relatively easy to identify the kind of (abrupt and politically visible) change that occur at *critical junctures* and then shape characteristics of governance arrangements in *path dependent* ways that are likely to manifest themselves as typical characteristics distinguishing one particular system from another (Pierson 2004). However, we are also open to the possibility that more gradual and minor forms of change may have significant implications, and lead to far greater and more encompassing change than originally intended (Mahoney and Thelen 2010). This kind of approach allows us to deepen and fill in the picture sketched by the regime approach above, and to focus on the role of the administrative apparatus and how its characteristics may vary across nations belonging to the same regime and to what extent this specifically affect HE governance in the Scandinavian countries.

The focus on institutional arrangements differs from studies of partisan politics and it adds dynamism to the regime perspective. It moves from structure, perceptions and practices as regards the proper role of the state and state society relations to policy processes and their outcomes in terms of organizational arrangements. Rather than assuming a one to one relationship between political party preferences and policies, the focus is on actual processes and their participants. This leads us to the last assumption (A4): higher education governance policies in countries belonging to the same type of regime may develop diverse administrative arrangements based on choices affected by peculiar actor constellations at historically distinct junctures as well as political and administrative gradual processes of change. Thus, one would ask questions such as: by whom are reform bills drafted and adopted? What role do ministries and other civil service agencies play in policy making and implementation over time and why? What is the relationship between universities and the state and how was it shaped? How are internal governance systems organized?

Scandinavian higher education governance

All Scandinavian countries have fairly similar HE systems in the sense that they belong to what Ansell (2013 : 165ff) calls the Mass Public Model, characterized by relatively high enrollment rates, by being almost entirely public and supported by high funding levels and massive public investments in HE and research. There has been relatively little political disagreement about core issues of enrollment, subsidization and cost. In this sense Scandinavian HE policies mirror the typical social democratic welfare orientation and the relative consensus about core questions related to the prominent role of public HE, an observation that finds general support in the literature (Ahola et al. 2014, Börjesson et al. 2014, Thomsen et al. 2014) and lends support to our second assumption indicating that a common set of values has shaped the welfare orientation of HE policies in the three countries. It should also be noted that an additional motivation for these policies has been economic, turning on the importance of investing in higher education and research in order to improve the competitive edge of post-industrial economies on the international market place (Börjesson et al. 2014). However, beyond these areas of relative consensus, obvious areas of divergence and variation should also be noted.

We shall now present a brief analysis of Scandinavian HE systems and their governance arrangements at the national and institutional levels. By means of the perspectives and assumptions presented above, we will analyze the different characteristics of the systems following the same sequence as we did in the above conceptual discussion. After a brief empirical overview of some characteristics of Scandinavian university governance, we ask three questions: 1) What are the differences and similarities among the three countries? 2) How can the similarities and differences be explained? 3) Are the similarities strong enough

to justify grouping them together under the common label of a Scandinavian model of HE governance?

Similarities and differences

We have already pointed out one basic similarity regarding the general access and welfare orientation of higher education policies in the Scandinavian countries. Until 1960 there were eight universities in Scandinavia, two each in Denmark (Copenhagen, Aarhus) and Norway (Oslo, Bergen) and four in Sweden (Uppsala, Lund, Stockholm, Gothenburg). Since then, HE in all three countries has gone through enormous changes. The idea that universities have been *insular* institutions removed from their surroundings seems far from the reality of institutional development over the last five decades in terms of *size* (catering to between 40 and 50% as opposed to a few per cent of each new generation) and *integration* (from a few single institutions to more integrated HE systems consisting of a varied mix of institutions under common legislation, degree- and funding systems). During this period, universities in all three countries have undergone several major reforms that have reshaped their governance systems beginning with “democratization” of the governance systems during the 1970s. Compared to continental European countries such as France and Germany, Scandinavian full professors were “bending with the breeze” (Ruin 1991) and gave up their privileges as they accepted the demands to participate in decision making from junior faculty, administrative staff and students almost without putting up any resistance. No political party put up strong resistance against this transition either (Bleiklie 1994; Neave and Rhoades 1987).

Since the late 1980s, various reforms have been introduced that all have been justified in terms of neo-liberal New Public Management ideologies reshaping the institutional structure through mergers, funding reforms and modes of regulation. In all three countries government initiated reforms have been important in reshaping how the system and individual institutions are managed and major changes have taken place during the first decade of the 2000s. As a common denominator one might say that Scandinavian governments have been relatively active in reshaping their HE systems, but with considerable variation in terms of timing and emphasis of the reform activity (Ahola et al. 2014). Scandinavian countries no longer stand out as “reluctant reformers” in a European context (Bleiklie and Michelsen 2013, Hansen 2011). In terms of governance arrangements, there are some important similarities in policy movements concerning the relationship between the state and HE institutions as well as internal governance arrangements. However, the organizational arrangements through which these policy movements take place are quite diverse.

First of all, the three countries differ as far as state structures are concerned. In Norway and Sweden, HE at the central level has evolved as the responsibility of one government ministry, the Ministry of Education, and is not spread out on several ministries as in Denmark, where

there is a stronger focus on employment and relevance to the economy than in the other two countries. Below ministry level, all three countries have established agencies for quality assurance and/or accreditation, although differently organized. While one agency is responsible for HE quality assurance in Sweden and Norway, in Denmark these functions are divided among several institutions, where tasks are divided according to sector affiliation. Research councils constitute an important source of external research funding in all three countries, but are also organized very differently. Whereas Norway has developed one monolithic research funding organization, with potential for coordination and co-production across different types of research, the two others have retained more differentiated structures, where different types of research (basic, applied and sector specific) are organized on a more autonomous basis.

Secondly, the relationship between central government authorities and HE institutions in terms of formal institutional autonomy is changing. All three countries seem to follow a trend where the authority of the institutions to make decisions at their own discretion is emphasized (Hedmo et al 2014, Bleiklie 2009). Governments all emphasize the ability of institutions to operate as “strategic actors” in order to acquire external resources, talent and prestige; and to generally strengthening their position on what is increasingly perceived as a market place. To what extent “autonomy” reforms actually have resulted in increased space for strategic decision-making or what de Boer and Enders (2017) call “autonomy in practice” is ambiguous in all the three countries. In terms of formal autonomy, there are some interesting differences. Danish universities enjoy, as independent foundations, a higher degree of formal autonomy than Norwegian and Swedish universities that continue to be civil service institutions. However, in all three countries, ministries tend to monitor rather than to steer educational development, and universities enjoy more autonomy than previously with regard to budget decisions and hiring policies. In addition to legislation, steering relationships between state and institutions are enacted through funding mechanisms, negotiations, consultations, contracts, agreements, targets and trust. The legal framework is less important as a steering tool. As for funding, all three countries have adopted some version of formula funding characterized by a basic grant, a result based grant in addition to an increasing share of external competitive funding for universities. The formulas vary however, as Norwegian universities receive a higher proportion of their income as a public basic grant than their Danish and Swedish counterparts, and the latter receive the highest share of competitive (public) funding (de Dominicis et al. 2011). Another system level trend is institutional mergers. Waves of institutional mergers have swept all three countries at various times and to various degrees, during the 1990s and 2000s, mostly inspired or mandated by government initiatives.

Governance arrangements within HE institutions have been reformed as well during the 2000s in all three countries. The expressed values that have motivated reforms have been almost identical and may be summarized by the concepts of quality, efficiency and relevance. In addition, the focus of reforms have been similar in different periods: expansion and

democratization during the 1960s and 1970s, integration of teaching oriented and vocationally oriented institutions during the 1980s, strengthening leadership, management and stakeholder influence during the 1990s, the Bologna process, further managerial reforms and initiatives to strengthen elite research since the millennium. One common feature is that institutional boards with external representatives appointed by the ministries and with representation from internally elected academic staff and students have been established in all three countries. Although it is possible to identify common trends in the development of university governance systems, the timing and organizational solutions that have been chosen in the respective countries have varied considerably. This can be illustrated by the timing and shape of institutional boards at universities (HE institutions). While Sweden introduced university boards with external representation already in 1977, they were introduced in Norway in 1995 and in Denmark in 2003. The composition of the boards reveals in addition a different understanding of the mission of universities and how they best can be managed as public institutions. While Danish arrangements already during the 1980s represented the most clearly expressed attempt to combine university autonomy with strong central steering, Norwegian arrangements have been more inclined to maintain participatory arrangements although they are now counterbalanced by stronger managerial structures and leadership mandates (Bleiklie 2009, Kyvik and Ødegård 1990). The Swedish development has been gradual, during which university boards have wrested control over the chairmanship from the vice chancellors and then over the recruitment of vice chancellors from the faculty, and gradually started to recruit vice chancellors from outside the institutions (Engwall 2007). The early introduction of external representatives on the Swedish university boards was originally motivated by ideas about social engineering through state control, that during the 1990s were replaced by New Public Management ideas about corporate management and stakeholder control.

In the last couple of years, we have seen indications that a new reform focus is emerging. Although the growth in HE the last ten years has continued in Scandinavia it has been particularly strong in Denmark, propelled by funding arrangements putting more emphasis on candidate production (“taximeter funding”) than in the two other countries. However, questions are now increasingly being asked about the need for further HE expansion (Thomsen 2014), and unprecedented measures have been taken to reduce expansion and increase labour market relevance. Even though growth has continued in Norway and Sweden, there is an increasing focus on what has been dubbed the ‘masters disease’ by the CEO of the employers’ association in Norway (NHO), Kristin Skogen Lund. New actor constellations articulate the need for a shift in educational expansion towards novel combinations of academic and more practical skills. Furthermore, new mechanisms for employer influence in skill formation at the central and local levels have been constructed in order to secure increased labor market relevance in HE. These developments might be interpreted in terms of perceived HE system saturation, where the endless frontier of expansion is curbed by the introduction of mechanisms designed to avoid overproduction and secure labor market

relevance. This indicates that the relationship between higher education and the labor market may move into focus of HE reformers and possibly shape reforms and the politics of HE in new ways as the sector potentially moves to the center stage of economic and welfare policy in the Scandinavian social investment state (Morel, Palier and Palme 2012).

Similarities and differences explained

Party politics. In all three countries government initiated reforms have been important in shaping and reshaping how the system and individual institutions are managed, and major changes took place during the first decade of the 2000s. In terms of governance arrangements, there are some important similarities regarding the relationship between the state and HE institutions as well as internal governance principles. To what extent could these changes be attributed to partisan politics? While the universalization of HE was carried out under social democratic rule, NPM reforms are often seen as part of the neo-liberal agenda after the 1980s, and it could be suggested that these reforms were implemented at times with right wing or centre-right governments rather than centre-left governments. In the literature on education there has been a strong tendency to ascribe this reform movement to the increasing power of the political Right (Telhaug et al. 2006).

If we look at government incumbency, similar developments could be identified in all three countries. All the Scandinavian countries have a strong tradition of social democratic rule. The Swedish Social Democratic Party was the strongest of the three, and played the leading role in politics since the interwar period. Only five general elections in 1976, 1979, 1991, 2006 and the latest in 2010 provided the basis for a centre-right government. In Norway, the Social Democratic Party was the largest party in parliament since the election in 1927 up to the 2009 election, but right-wing parties have assumed a stronger role in politics since the 1980s onwards. From 1981 to 1997, governments alternated between minority social democratic governments and conservative led centre-right governments. The Danish Labour party was in a less powerful position than their Swedish and Norwegian counterparts, and the party became increasingly dependent on compromises with the centre-right and liberal parties quite early. Furthermore, Denmark had right-wing governments from 1982 to 1993, and again from 2001 to 2009 – a total of 19 years. Thus, the Right in Denmark has held power for a much longer period.

Sweden took the lead in reorganizing and reforming higher education. In 1977, all post-secondary education were upgraded in one comprehensive reform leap, and subjected to a common regulatory framework (Bauer et al., 1999). Sweden went further than any other country in Europe in establishing a unified higher education system (Kim 2002). In Norway and Denmark HE reform processes were more incremental. Norway followed Sweden on the road towards a unified regulatory framework, while Denmark kept a binary regulatory structure.

These features suggest a symmetrical pattern where social democratic party strength was reflected in realization of the comprehensive organization of HE, while lack of social democratic strength reproduced a binary pattern, which lend support to partisan politics claims (A1). However, while it might be claimed that comprehensively organized educational structures are related to increased redistribution (Ansell 2013), there is no clear relation between HE regulatory characteristics and HE expansion in the Scandinavian countries. The combination of ongoing reclassification processes and different definitions make diachronic comparisons of expansion in the three countries inherently problematic, but there is much to suggest that student expansion has followed similar trajectories (Börjesson, Ahola, Helland and Thomsen 2014). Two great waves of expansion can be identified: One in the 1960s, the other in the 1990s. Very different conditions were at hand for each of the two phases. The first expansion of the 1960s was driven by stable economic and demographic growth. The expansion in the 1990s occurred during a time of economic stagnation, and a declining youth population.

The Swedish 1977 reform was a strange combination of radical expansion of access towards mass education with the introduction of *numerus clausus* policies restricting access (Bauer et al., 1999). In Norway and Denmark as well, access was restricted by similar mechanisms setting limits to higher education expansion during the height of the social democratic period.

However, does this mean that the Scandinavian countries also have embraced the NPM issue differently according to the strength of the social democratic parties? Actual party constellations and policy dynamics have differed significantly, but in slightly surprising ways. The Danish policy trajectory has followed a strong expansionist trend, propelled by output oriented steering. Denmark has been described as a frontrunner of “the market approach” to higher education (Wright & Ørberg, 2011: 275). In comparison, Norway has been more reluctant. Similarly, Sweden seems to be the one among the countries where NPM ideas have had the strongest impact in education policies. It might look surprising that Sweden, normally regarded as the most “social democratic” country in Scandinavia, would take the NPM drive further than, for instance, Norway, where social democrats were weaker. The Swedish 1993 reform, which was strongly market oriented, was carried through by the new center-right government (Kim 2002). Nevertheless, its contents were strongly influenced by the drafts prepared by the social democrats, before they were ousted from government (Green-Pedersen 2009). In Denmark, social democrats have consistently opposed market-type reforms advocated by the right, whereas in Sweden, they have been much more open to these ideas. Similar reform patterns also apply when it comes to formal institutional autonomy, where Danish institutions have gained more formal autonomy than the institutions in the two other countries. As mentioned above they are organized as independent foundations and are no longer part of the civil service. Thus, the differences in formal autonomy may lend support to A1 and the explanatory power of partisan politics. However, when it comes to autonomy in practice, these differences become more ambiguous. For instance while Danish HE institutions

enjoy a relatively high degree of autonomy in the area of research, it is more limited when it comes to establishment or closing down of study programs, while Norwegian institutions enjoy autonomy over the development and closure of study programs and less autonomy over research funding. These observations indicate that the possible impact of partisan politics often cannot be deduced from ideological positions in a straightforward way. The choice of specific reform measures and policy instruments may be influenced by a number of factors in addition to party ideology. For instance, Hansen (2011) in her analysis of Scandinavian NPM policies suggests that the level of partisan conflict over NMP-inspired marketization and privatization proposals was noticeable during the 1980s. However, it died down during the 1990s when social democratic resistance against such proposals diminished in the face of economic crisis, and the prospects of active modernization policies became more attractive.

Still questions about the specificity of the HE sector remain. In general, educational issues have been high on the political agenda in all three countries. Nevertheless, HE issues have not been in the eye of the political storm. Until recently, HE has remained an undisputed endless frontier for expansion and integration of increasing numbers of students from all social strata. What has changed is located in the field of administrative policies, which in general bears the mark of low politics rather than high. In this field, the level of partisan political conflict has been rather low, and all parties seem open to new ideas for the reorganization and modernization of HE governance systems. This suggests the possibility of addressing a broader set of issues, analyzing the political partisan dynamics in HE, beyond the question of redistributive conflicts and integrating into the analysis the changing relations between the state and the public sector in the form of administrative policies. There is much to suggest that the relative absence of partisan conflict indicated by A2 may have contributed to a rather pragmatic approach to HE policies. Potentially this also opens up for the possibility that policy developments have taken place within the administrative domain suggested by A3.

Regimes, path dependencies and critical junctures. The above considerations lead us to suggest the possibility that HE policy, or at least important aspects of it, have been rather insulated from party politics and consequently left to the civil service and HE institutions. If this is true, we may find that cross-national variation in Scandinavian HE governance is better explained by general or sector specific administrative traditions and trajectories than by party politics.

When we look at the organizational arrangements at the central government level and the agencies responsible for regulating and steering HE, variation is a striking feature. This holds true whether we are referring to the role of politicians, the ministry and other agencies such as directorates, research funding, evaluation agencies and the size and composition of reform commissions. Since universities are or have been until recently part of the civil service, one possible explanation is that national administrative traditions have developed along somewhat different paths in the wake of the transition from autocratic monarchy to more

representative forms of rule during the 19th century. Sweden established e.g. the tradition of small ministries and large administrative directorates under, but at arms length's distance from ministerial control, including formal limitations on the ministers' and the ministries' right to interfere with decisions made by the directorates. The purpose was to keep the bureaucracy beyond the reach of royal executive power. Thus, the bureaucracy became and still is a stabilizing element in Swedish politics, through an arrangement that also contributed to integrating universities in the public administration and limiting their autonomy (Bleiklie 1994). Danish history is somewhat different. After the introduction of representative rule, certain tasks and responsibilities remained under royal control. Universities were among them. When they later were transferred to the ministry, they remained at arm's length from ministerial control (Hansen 2011). The binary organization of Danish HE reflect governance arrangements where the institutions and the education they offer have belonged to different ministries, and research was regulated separately from HE until 2011. Norwegian universities can look back at a more ambiguous historical legacy. During the 19th century until parliamentary rule was established from 1884, the parliament fought for an autonomous civil service, including the university, in order to keep the bureaucracy at arm's length from royal (and by implication Swedish) executive authority. After 1884 when parliament gained control over the executive, these policies were reversed and parliament demonstrated its willingness to interfere quite directly in university affairs. Thus in all three countries choices that were made at critical junctures in their political history shaped state-university relationships and led them onto paths that still contribute to the different patterns of autonomy that characterizes Danish, Norwegian and Swedish arrangements (Jacobsen 1964). While this account lends support to the explanatory power of decisions about administrative arrangements made at historically critical junctures, we have also seen how differences in how universities are led, in funding mechanisms and evaluation systems have been shaped and gradually developed since the 1990s in the context of sector level traditions. These characteristics are best explained by A4 regarding how administrative traditions strongly influence national arrangements in a policy field that has led its life in relative insulation from parliamentary 'high politics'.

Conclusion

The analysis above allows us both to answer the three questions we raised in the introduction and at the same time discuss some of the theoretical implications that follow from the analysis. A very rough answer to the question about similarities and differences among the HE systems of the three countries is this.

When we consider the publicness, the massive investments and the emphasis of extending access to the entire population, the Scandinavian HE systems are very similar, and we may put them under the common label of a Scandinavian Model of HE. This similarity can best be

explained as the outcome of partisan politics, social democratic strength, and how political coalitions were established in all Scandinavian countries in support of the redistributive effects of heavy investments in the public HE system. Thus partisan politics is not just a question about the power balance between contending parties and their alternative policy goals and programs. It is also a question of how political parties interact and develop their policy positions, as well as the nature of national democratic processes and the extent to which contending parties are able to establish long-term co-operation and compromise on common solutions at the national level. The expansive redistributive agenda of public funding and the massification of higher education have been widely accepted in the Scandinavian countries. This general acceptance represented a critical juncture preceding the massive HE expansion from the 1960s onward. It may be best explained by the emergence of the dominant social democratic parties as HE expansion protagonists and the formation of cross-party coalitions supporting expansion. The explanation usually offered is that HE expenditure has evolved into a non-contested policy issue among most parties. As suggested by Ansell (2013), under conditions of mass higher education, even conservatives have been willing to support increased spending. The increasing demand and changing aspirations in the population in general created challenges that had to be dealt with by both leftist and rightist governments, and practical, pragmatic solutions had to be found.

When we consider the variation in state-institution relationships, and the governance arrangements, all three countries have been moving in the same direction (towards NPM inspired organizational setups), but regarding timing and emphasis of the policies, the differences are more striking than the similarities. The histories of the three HE systems vary considerably, and continue to shape policies. In this context, the label "Scandinavian model" seems less relevant. We found that the differences we observed are best explained in terms of path dependencies and evolving administrative traditions. We have suggested one possible interpretation of this last observation in our comparison of HE policies in seven European countries (Bleiklie and Michelsen 2013). Politico-administrative regime characteristics cannot be regarded as direct causal mechanisms producing specific decisions in each single case. They are best considered as habitats that shape the perceptions of political actors and at the same time open up or limit their options when decisions are to be made. In the longer term, politico-administrative regimes may constitute a force that shape the path along which policies develop.

If we consider the history of HE governance reform in Scandinavia, three features stand out. First, although the Scandinavian HE governance systems are different and have evolved differently, they have sustained similar and typical Scandinavian policy features in terms of publicness, access and investment. Second, NPM reform policies have gradually moved from being (occasionally) politically contested, to being perceived as technical and administrative issues rather than issues infused with partisan political values. The fear (or ambition) of marketization of HE seems to have waned, partly because the Scandinavian countries have

emerged as “modernizers” rather than “marketizers” (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004), and partly because more than 30 years of NPM reforms have brought them into the political mainstream and made them less contested in partisan terms. Thirdly, the HE systems are growing and are not just considered strategically important in welfare terms, but also increasingly integrated with labor market and economic policies. Issues of HE system saturation, where further expansion is mediated by labor market relevance considerations, makes it tempting to assume that HE policies are likely to be more exposed to partisan political contestation than before. However, it is still too early to conclude in the case of the three Scandinavian countries. Much will depend on the combination of three factors: the political ability to form broad coalitions behind political compromises, the resilience of politico-administrative traditions that although different, have contributed to rather stable policy environments and the ability to sustain economic conditions for social investments in higher education

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