



Norwegian higher education futures

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Abstract

The paper deals with the future of Norwegian higher education as part of a Nordic project on higher education futures. To identify future scenarios for Norwegian higher education (HE), the paper uses the theoretical lens of historical institutionalism to focus on scenario building. Like in the other Nordic countries, Norwegian HE and research are characterized by easily accessible and free public HE provision, high participation rates, and a high level of investment in HE and research. However, the question is this: If we look back at the development of Norwegian HE the last decades, to what extent can we expect present developments to persist and to what extent can we expect more or less sharp breaks and deviations from past and present developments? Departing from an institutionalist position, two historically grounded visions and related scenarios are identified: an academic excellence scenario and a national service scenario. The scenarios reflect tensions between different visions of the shape, emphasis, and orientation of HE and research. The empirical focus is on the developments of HE along five dimensions: growth, systemic integration, academic drift, labor market relevance, and governance. First, the conceptual approach is presented, outlining the use of scenarios and an institutionalist approach to thinking about the future of HE. Secondly, the paper outlines the five trends regarding past and ongoing developments. Third, some ideas about future developments are outlined, before the conclusion is drawn.

Keywords Higher education · Governance · Higher education systems · Public policy

Introduction

Writing about the future of Nordic higher education (HE) in the latter half of 2023 is different from how that same exercise appeared in late 2019. Since the invitation to contribute to this special issue on the future of Nordic HE was issued four years ago, the future is coming at us in ways we did not imagine at the time. Pertinent questions about the effect of global and regional challenges—climate change, pandemic, war in Europe, a changing world order, and threats against democracy—have manifested themselves, sometimes with sudden or overwhelming force, and they need to be addressed. Yet, this is also an

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opportunity to distinguish between events that may get intense public attention for shorter periods, but then quickly fade away, and developments with deep long-term impact.

Identifying possible futures of HE systems globally or in the specific European context by means of scenarios is a recognized heuristic by means of which one may identify social and institutional forces potentially shaping future developments (De Boer & Westerheijden, 2005; Kosow & Gassner, 2008). However, in a social science context, scenario heuristics may be based on a wide array of research approaches ranging from statistical prediction to narratives of major trends.

To identify future scenarios for Norwegian HE, we use historical institutionalism as a theoretical approach to scenario building. The major research question turns on change and stability. Using the theoretical lens of institutionalism, the question is this: If we look back at the development of Norwegian HE the last decades, to what extent can we expect present developments to persist and to what extent can we expect more or less sharp breaks and deviations from past and present developments? Two scenarios are identified: an academic excellence scenario and a national service scenario.

The empirical focus is on the developments of HE along five dimensions: growth, systemic integration, academic drift, labor market relevance, and governance. Like in the other Nordic countries, Norwegian HE and research are characterized by easily accessible and free public HE provision, high participation rates, and a high level of investment in HE and research. In addition, Norwegian public finances are uniquely strong due to North Sea oil and natural gas revenues. Although these characteristics are helpful to identifying Norwegian HE as a member of the Nordic family of HE systems, they do not necessarily determine developments along the five dimensions in specific ways. We shall therefore ground the two visions historically, identifying their relative strength the last sixty years in order to assess their positions in current policy debates and reform proposals using the five trends to demonstrate empirically competing visions and scenarios for Norwegian HE futures.

The paper is organized as follows. First, the conceptual approach is presented, outlining the use of scenarios and an institutionalist approach to thinking about the future of HE. Secondly, the paper outlines the five trends regarding past and ongoing developments where continuity as well as possible breaks with long-standing trends are discussed. Third, some ideas about future developments are outlined, before the conclusion is drawn.

A historical approach to thinking about the future

A core idea in this paper is the importance of grounding guesses about the future empirically. From a scientific point of view, the future cannot be known (Aykut et al., 2019). The alternative is to make assumptions based on observations of current or past states and events.

Scenarios

For this purpose, we will use the scenario concept as a heuristic to identify alternative possible future developments based on assumptions about how and to what extent existing social structures and ongoing processes may shape the future state of HE institutions and systems (Enders et al., 2005). The scenario concept is fuzzy and does not refer to one or a set of specific approaches. It entails neither a specific scientific theory nor a specific

scientific method, but rather a mixture of approaches. The following list may illustrate the range of phenomena encompassed by the concept: trend analysis and extrapolation, input-output models, techniques involving questionnaires, surveys of experts and interview techniques, cost-benefit analysis, innovation and diffusion analysis, construction of models and simulation techniques, brainstorming, scenario methods, roleplaying, creativity methods, future workshops (Kosow & Gassner, 2008: 5f). To formulate more precise assumptions about HE systems and institutions, we need a theoretical approach that may be helpful to accomplishing two things: (1) identify ongoing developments that have shaped HE and are likely to do so in the years to come as well and (2) identify existing and emerging structures and processes, actors, and ideas that may push, break, or mold ongoing developments in new directions. Historical institutionalism is a good fit for this purpose.

Institutionalism

One of the major assumptions defining institutionalism is that social institutions tend to sustain established patterns of social action. Drawing on two strands of institutional theory, primarily historical institutionalism, but also some ideas from sociological institutionalism, we aim to shed light on recent developments in Norwegian HE.

An important assumption that informs the following analysis is this: if one wants to predict what will happen in the future, the best bet is to look at the past. The concept of path dependency was introduced by historical institutionalists to grasp this phenomenon. It entails that the behavior of actors who operate in institutionalized environments are likely to be better explained by established values and the routines and habits associated with them, rather than by functional needs or conflict and competition (Hall, 1993; Pierson, 2000). Therefore, historical institutionalists have been challenged to move beyond the deterministic assumption about path dependency, and they have given considerable attention to change. Their efforts have partly aimed at explaining the conditions under which change takes place and partly at developing a differentiated conceptual understanding of different kinds of change such as “punctuated equilibria,” abrupt changes caused by outside shocks to established institutions (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993) and various forms of gradual change such as “layering,” “displacement,” “drift,” and “conversion” (Streeck & Thelen, 2005), concepts that will be explained as they are used in the analysis.

Higher education dynamics

Organizational sociologists have argued that universities are embedded in highly institutionalized environments (Meyer et al., 2007). Therefore, their role and position in society are likely to be better explained by extraordinarily stable cultural values such as progress, justice, rationality, and science than by functional needs or rational behavior (Meyer et al., 2007). Yet, HE has undergone an organizational revolution in terms of size, organizational forms, and governance arrangements. In this perspective HE, although based on highly stable values, is dynamic as well.

One source of the dynamic is radical changes in organizational arrangements and tensions arising from perceived inconsistencies between institutionalized values and emerging organizational forms such as strengthening of managerial structures, forms of leadership, and governance arrangements. The tension between revolutionary change in terms of size and organizational forms the last 60 years (Bleiklie et al., 2017) and an amazing stability in terms of basic values underpinning HE and research

has been pointed out by Meyer et al. (2007) globally and is clearly present in the Nordic countries as well (e.g., Isopahkala-Bouret et al., 2018). Furthermore, with increased participation and growing HE and research, one may reasonably assume that the values underpinning HE have gained strength in and become more widely spread and held by growing segments of society. Adding to this is the steady movement of decision-making authority upward from academic institutions to the central government and within academic institutions away from academic disciplines and academic individuals. This adds to the significance of decisions made by institutional leaders and central government.

A second source of tension is related to the political implications of growth itself in democratic societies. In a public HE system like the Norwegian one, HE has become a major, costly, and politically highly visible public sector. Thus, a once relatively secluded policy arena characterized by consensus within a policy community of few actors has grown into a costly and highly visible policy arena where policies are formulated with the participation of a more diverse set of actors, at times in issue networks that vary from case to case depending on which aspect of HE policy the policy in question deals with (Rhodes & Marsh, 1992). Here, the potential for different and more divergent policy preferences and more clearly formulated party preferences has increased. Accordingly, as the sector has become increasingly interesting to political actors and media it has moved up the ladder to “high politics” where conflict and contestation are played out and compromise forged on the parliamentary arena under close media scrutiny.

The radical change HE has undergone in terms of size and organization during the last sixty years is made up by accumulated smaller changes rather than one big external shock. Yet, the cultural values underpinning HE have been highly stable. The question is rather if the development of massive, integrated HE and research systems in the Nordic and several Western countries has produced new and possibly disruptive tensions relating to two major visions—*academic excellence and national service*—and possible futures of these higher education systems. The two visions refer to two broad understandings of the concept of knowledge as *procedure* (scientific concepts and methods) or *outcome* (products and functions), corresponding to frequently used concepts in the literature, such as a “cultural” and “utilitarian” purpose for basic research and higher education (Bleiklie & Byrkjeflot, 2002), or “pure” and “applied” research modes (Becher, 1989).

The visions are complex, not necessarily mutually exclusive, and the content of each of the two visions has changed over time depending on to which aspects of HE it relates, e.g., teaching, research, or third mission activities, and to the relevant national or international audience (academics, bureaucrats, politicians, businesses, etc.) that may serve as a yardstick for HE performance. Looking toward the future, we ask three questions. (1) What is the position of the cultural underpinning of HE today and what does it indicate for the future? (2) What is the relationship (mutually supporting or in conflict) between the cultural underpinning of HE and its size, organization, governance, and social role? (3) How and to what extent do the two visions—academic excellence and national service—affect and play out in Norwegian higher education and what does the current situation bode for the future?

We are going to start out with an outline of five trends that may shed light on HE development and futures. Growth, systemic integration, and governance are simply the best documented characteristics of HE development, while academic drift and labor market relevance have loomed large in policy debates on HE the last decades. Policy positions on developments along the five dimensions shed light on the two major visions of HE futures,

while the way in which current HE reforms and policies sustain or undermine these visions shed light on the HE futures.

Data and methods

The paper is a secondary analysis of available literature, supplied with primary analysis of official documents on Norwegian HE in a comparative perspective. Among the contributions are publications from a several large studies in which the author has participated as project leader or member of the project team (Bleiklie et al., 2000; Bleiklie et al., 2006; Bleiklie et al., 2017; Michelsen & Halvorsen 2002; Paradeise et al., 2009). The focus is primarily on changes in policy, governance, and organizational aspects of HE and research.

Measuring support or critique of the two visions, we will be attentive to two forms of questioning of HE and research in policy arguments and HE reform processes. We distinguish between *utility claims* and *truth-and-merit claims*. The former turns on the utility of research, teaching, and third mission activities for the nation, society, or the international community. The latter turns on the truth-and-merit claims, and the argument that high-quality basic research represents both an indispensable value in itself and is socially, economically, and politically useful in the longer term.

Trends

Given the above point of departure, we start out with growth, the most persistent and ubiquitous trend in HE in Norway as well as globally the last 100 years (Meyer & Ramirez, 2000).

Growth and demographics

Growth has been persistent throughout the period with alternating periods of rapid and slower growth. Measured in student population, HE has grown from less than 8.300 students and an entry rate of a few percent of every new age cohort in 1960. Today, the total student population is about 300.000 comprising around 40% percent of every new age cohort (DBH, 2023). The participation rate is similar to the other Nordic countries (Thomsen et al., 2017) and particularly similar to Finland in terms of the highest degree of equal access to HE (Isopahkala-Bouret et al., 2018).

Two major developments have contributed to growth after 1960. The first is increased participation rates among relevant age groups. The second development has been prompted by the inclusion of non-academic, vocational, and professional colleges in the HE system from 1976 on. After the increased participation rates at universities leveled off around 1970, the growth took place within the college sector, at first associated with the establishment of district colleges from 1969 and later with the inclusion of professional colleges in the HE system. From the late 1980s, student numbers at universities again started to rise sharply from about 1987 and continued to do so for ten years, before leveling off and remaining relatively stable until 2007 when the numbers started to rise rather steeply once again. This last increase happened mainly because most state colleges became parts of universities through mergers.

Several specific factors may have contributed to increased participation rates: student demand for access to education, labor market demand for highly educated labor, and government policies making funding for HE expansion and economic

support to students available. One may also add the underlying belief in the association between HE and prosperity that has driven growth globally irrespective of level of economic development or political regime (Meyer et al., 1992). There are good reasons for this expansion because 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). Nevertheless, the degree and rate of HE expansion vary across countries and regions. In a European and North American context, Ansell (2010) has demonstrated that the Scandinavian countries stand out with high participation rates and massive investments in predominantly public HE, driven by a particular constellation of political parties and institutions that have sustained this development.

Overall, there are few indications that the growth is likely to stop. Current participation rates of about 40% of new age cohorts means that there still is room for growth, and participation rates are still rising. The number of students from abroad at Norwegian HE institutions is small, about 4% in 2021. While the government decision to collect tuition fees for students from countries outside EU/EEA from the fall term 2023 seems to reduce the number of foreign students in this category by 80%, the total number of students will be affected only marginally. Thus, future growth depends on participation rates among domestic students, a student population that is not just growing but also getting older. This indicates that the idea of “lifelong learning,” an additional source of growth, is beginning to take hold.

This might limit HE growth, but at the moment growth and easier access to education is a major and persistent government goal (Meld St. 14 (2020-2021): 12). Long-term trends and current government policies point to further growth, with a somewhat older and more diverse student population. As will be shown, alternative visions of HE are related to issues of the shape and emphasis of future growth rather than growth itself. In a long-term perspective, the tension between excellence and utility considerations and ways of legitimizing HE have existed since the first Norwegian university was established in 1813 (Bleiklie et al., 2000). As will be shown below, what has been questioned by policy actors and academics are the priorities and shape of growth.

University growth cannot be fully accounted for without noting that the size of academic faculty and administrative staff has grown to provide teaching and research and administrative support and services needed to run HE institutions. At the same time, the composition of the university staff population has changed in terms of gender, national background, and the way academic and administrative positions are ordered. Since 1960, HE has undergone a gender revolution from male-dominated population in terms of students and academic staff and moved to 60% female share of students and approximate gender parity among faculty except for full professors (Isopahkala-Bouret et al., 2018). The administration was once numerically dominated by a female corps of secretaries, working under a small group of male leaders at institutional and faculty levels. It has now turned into a planning bureaucracy with highly educated staff and has moved closer to gender parity at all levels. Both student and academic staff populations have changed from a mainly national to a far more multinational composition, primarily spurred by European integration through student exchange programs and a common European academic labor market, but also by exchange programs with countries outside the EU/EEA area. This development is the outcome of consensual policies considered beneficial both for utilitarian and academic excellence concerns.

Systemic integration

Until 1946, when the University of Bergen was established, Norway had one university, the University of Oslo. In 1960, there were 6 HE institutions: two comprehensive and four specialized universities (business administration, civil engineering/architecture, agriculture, and veterinary science). Two additional universities were established in 1968. In 1976, a new tier of HE institutions was formally organized as a regional college system under the 19 counties that existed at the time. The inclusion of educational institutions and programs that previously were not considered part of the HE system, such as colleges educating teachers, nurses, social workers, and engineers, radically changed the face and size of HE. These institutions were teaching institutions focused on practice-based vocational training. The regional tier also included the district colleges offering disciplinary short cycle programs of two to four years and came to include a certain and expanding element of research. Thus, a binary HE system was established in which the universities were national institutions managed directly by the Ministry of Education, while the regional colleges were managed by county-level regional boards. However, the regional system came to be considered too decentralized and fragmented. Many small institutions spread across different regions operated independently, and vocational institutions and academically oriented district colleges operated insulated from each other. The regional boards did not fulfill the political ambition to coordinate and develop regional collaboration among institutions based on the specific needs of each county (Jerdal, 1996).

The 1994 College Reform transferred responsibility for the colleges from the counties to the state, and the colleges were renamed state colleges. Their number was also drastically reduced from 98 to 26 through a comprehensive merger process. Thus, the HE system remained binary, composed of a state college sector, alongside a university sector made up of four comprehensive and eight specialized universities (Michelsen & Halvorsen, 2002).

The 2003 Quality Reform introduced the Bologna process with a common degree structure and credit system for all HE institutions. The government also established a set of criteria defining the conditions that state colleges had to fulfill to be upgraded to universities. In the wake of the Quality Reform, half of the existing state colleges were considering or had officially declared the ambition to become universities (Bleiklie et al., 2006).

This was the starting point of a process that has fundamentally altered the HE landscape since 2007 and particularly after the merger reform of 2015 (Meld.St.18 2014-2015). Today, the HE system consists of 10 universities, 6 specialized university colleges, and 5 university colleges. While the college sector was the largest in terms of the number of institutions and students in 2000, it is now reduced to a couple of institutions. Thus, the binary system has gradually been dismantled, and a formally uniform but effectively hierarchical system is emerging where the four top comprehensive research universities make up the top layer (receiving most of the external national and European research funding). Seven “new universities” make up the next layer and the remaining state colleges the bottom layer. Thus, the system has become more diversified in terms of study programs and areas of knowledge, while the way in which the programs are offered is becoming increasingly standardized within a formally uniform system of degrees and quality requirements.

Systemic integration may be considered an ongoing tendency from 1976 until today. However, if there is path of unbroken integration, it is also defined by twists and turns

where different parts of the system have grown at different rates. Two factors may explain this: shifting values and perceptions of the purpose of HE and evolving ideas about how HE systems should be organized. Whereas the university sector grew prior to 1970 because of increased participation rates among secondary education graduates, during the 1970s and 1980s turned the tide (Vabø, 1996). There was a developing concern at the government level about the cost of university education where degree studies lasted between 5 and 7 years. The goal was to get a larger share of students to study less expensive short cycle programs of two to four years at the newly established regional system of district colleges or at vocational colleges. This sector then started to grow rapidly, while student numbers at universities stagnated during this period of “vocationism” in HE observed in several European countries at the time (Neave, 1992; Vabø, 1994). Thus, perceptions of the purpose of HE was changing. Until the 1970s, access to HE was considered valuable for society in utilitarian and cultural terms and a welfare right for the individual student. Henceforth, there was an increased utilitarian emphasis on the level of spending on HE relative to society’s need for educated labor. In addition, there was an additional goal of decentralization to make HE more accessible at the regional level (Bleiklie et al., 2000; Jerdal, 1996; Vabø, 1996).

During the latter half of the 1980s, perceptions again started to change. There was increasing concern about the quality of HE. Research quality and research education were emphasized, driving increased investment in higher degree education at master’s and doctoral level (NOU, 1988:28). This favored expansion of the universities, a development that has come to characterize HE development until recently. Utilitarian concerns were important in the policy debate behind this changing emphasis, but with an emphasis on international economic competition and internationalization. At the same time, arguments favoring academic excellence and academic competition played an important part. Utilitarian economic concerns and academic excellence concerns fused. Again, this also involved a centralizing push favoring traditional universities located in major cities (Bleiklie et al., 2000).

The last part of this period was characterized by a series of mergers in the wake of the 2015 merger reform that followed a failed reform attempt in 2007 (Meld.St.18 2014-2015; NOU, 2008:3). Both proposals were based on the idea that the HE system was too fragmented with too many small institutions spread across the country, several of them located in remote areas, lacking the resources to develop research and sustain high-quality educational programs. The reform has been portrayed as a centralization process, which is correct in terms of leadership and managerial structures. However, the number of locations where HE is offered has remained constant as the merged institutions are multicampus universities. Nevertheless, the center left government that took power in October 2021 declared that HE had become too centralized and that it needed to be decentralized and offered “in locations where people live.” What this might mean has never been clarified, and no specific plan has been presented. The merger reform means that the distinction between universities and colleges no longer corresponds with the distinction between academically oriented programs and research emphasis on the one hand and practice-based vocational programs and teaching orientation on the other. Such differences are rather found between different faculties and departments within the merged universities. After the mergers, there are just two universities left that do not offer professional programs previously offered at practice-based professional colleges. The proposed decentralization of HE in today’s situation raises several questions regarding the future of higher education governance that will be dealt with later.

The stable, apparently path-dependent systemic integration and standardization processes reflect persistent beliefs in the need to make the HE system more efficient and

flexible. Apart from the regional expansion during the 1970s, later structural reforms have reduced the number and diversity of institutions. The last decade a hierarchical institutional system has taken shape, but recent policy proposals from the center left government indicate a shift in favor of decentralization, teaching, applied research, and a national orientation, apparently disfavoring the major research universities, research funding, and institutional autonomy. In terms of the institutional make-up of the system, standardization is an ongoing process the likely net result of which will be a more standardized system dominated by one institutional form, the comprehensive university, but as I will discuss below, with increasingly diverse and elaborate academic hierarchies within individual universities. Prevailing beliefs about how the need for education and research should be met in terms of program emphasis and organizational arrangements have shifted several times (Bleiklie & Michelsen, 2019). In Norway as well as at the Nordic and European levels, they seem to be driven by broad shifts in values and perceptions rather than by specific actors promoting specific interests (Bleiklie et al., 2017; Pinheiro et al., 2016). Similar recent shifts in government policies have been observed in other European countries such as Denmark (Wright, 2022) and the Netherlands (Løkeland-Stai, 2023).

The policy debates around growth throughout the period have ostensibly been dominated by utilitarian claims, but at the same time supporting academic truth-and-merit claims recognizing such values as academic freedom and institutional autonomy. The question is how these values, traditionally associated with and formally protected by traditional research universities, will be sustained in a system made up with few exceptions by large, diverse, complex multicampus institutions with strongly increased organizational and geographic distances between leadership and academic staff and students. This will be discussed later.

Academic drift

Until the 1990s Norwegian HE might be perceived as an organic system in which different institutions had different functions without perceiving themselves as part of a larger system (Bleiklie et al., 2000). However, the establishment of the district colleges, between 1969 and 1986, planted the seed of academic drift as academic perceptions of quality gradually permeated the emerging college system. The process lasted some 25 years from the late 1970s until the early 2000s.

The district colleges recruited faculty, predominantly early career university graduates in social sciences and humanities. Rather than embracing the stated policy goal of the government of becoming a new kind of vocational institutions, these institutions soon showed stronger affinity to a university educational tradition including a research component (Jerdal, 1996). However, the decisive push came with the 1994 College Reform, when HE institutions were brought into closer mutual contact, and their relative position in an integrated system became important. Whereas the vocational institutions were protected against academization by relative isolation from the academic institutions within the regional system, they lost this protection after The College Reform (Michelsen & Halvorsen, 2002). In addition, they were exposed to government standardization policies pushing for common degree structures and a common system of teaching and academic positions within a formally standardized system. Although the system was binary, the government came under mounting pressure from state colleges that wanted to become universities. Thus, the reform added strength to academic drift in the college sector. There was, however, still a clear difference between colleges with ambitions to become universities

and those colleges that still cultivated their profile as practice-oriented vocational institutions. By 2005, in the wake of The Quality Reform about half of the state colleges had no ambition to apply for university status. Ten years later in 2015 the merger reform process established a dialogue between the ministry and HE institutions through which 6 merger processes including 14 state colleges and 3 universities resulted in 6 multicampus institutions: 4 universities and 2 state colleges.

During the years between 2007 and 2015, however, mechanisms at many levels have contributed to academic drift within the state college sector. The overarching idea has been that strengthening the quality of the institution is tightly associated with research and research credentials. Increasingly, institutions have started to hire academic staff for positions (associate and full professors) that require research qualifications and include research as part of the job description and to establish educational programs at the master's and PhD levels. At the same time, all state colleges established a career structure with qualification criteria based on academic university standards. Although attempts were made to protect the values and practices of the vocational colleges, academic drift within the new formal structures soon gained the upper hand. However, the traditionally vocationally oriented programs in the new universities or state colleges are still using the practice-oriented character of their programs, including programs at the master's and PhD level to attract students and gain competitive advantage in the competition for students, talent, and funding.

Academic drift has proved to be a powerful trend and a highly path-dependent process, as measured in terms of growing research activities, research-based educational programs, and academic positions. Changing systemic structures have boosted the process. It is hard to find evidence indicating that this tendency will stop, apart from recent government attempts to reduce research funding. With the wider spread of research funds across the system one might expect tougher political struggles over allocation criteria. The persistent concentration of research to the four strongest research universities funds (88% of national research council funding and an even larger share of EU funding) might also be an issue of increased political contestation (Hatlen-utvalgets innstilling, 2022: 86-87). The establishment of new universities has been accompanied by complaints that the four older universities receive relatively better state funding than the rest and demands that all universities should be funded on equal terms. Although these demands have never been explicitly recognized, government funding to new universities and state colleges has increased more in real terms than funding to the older institutions (Hatlen-utvalgets innstilling, 2022: 90).

Labor market relevance

From its establishment in 1813, a major role for the University of Oslo was to meet the national need for learned professionals in the public bureaucracy, the judicial system, medical services, and upper secondary schools. This remained the major perspective on labor market relevance of the universities until the 1960s (Berg, 1992). The idea that HE is important to the general development of society in terms of economic growth and welfare is more recent, dating back to human capital theory in the late 1950s (Aamodt & Lyby, 2019). Somehow this idea has if anything grown stronger, but the more specific ideas about how HE is relevant to the labor market have varied and coincided with shifting ideas about labor market needs and different emphases in HE expansion.

During the 1970s when HE expansion was driven by an expanding college sector and the wave of "vocationalism," the dominant idea was that there was a mismatch between the need for candidates with professional short cycle education and the output of university

candidates with advanced degrees in the humanities and social sciences. The core idea was to adapt the output of candidates to fill a given labor market demand (Berg, 1992). In Norway this idea coincided with a rapid expansion of welfare state services run by the municipalities (primarily health care, but also schools, social services, and administration) (Halvorsen & Stjernø, 2008). This in turn meant a rapidly rising need for nurses, teachers, social workers, and business administration candidates.

When perceptions and policies started to change in the mid-1980s, a very different idea about labor market relevance was formulated. The idea was now that to compete in the international economic marketplace, the economy needed a highly educated work force with more advanced degrees (master's and PhDs). Higher levels of education also meant a more flexible labor force whose members could change and rapidly adapt to new jobs and deliver high-quality products and services in a dynamic economy. This happened in a period of relatively high levels of unemployment during the mid-1980s and 1990s, particularly among the young (NAV, 2022). In addition to the provision of highly educated labor, HE also served as a labor market regulator where the admission of more students to HE, through various forms of incentives and support, in particular low-cost programs in the humanities and social sciences, kept unemployed young people off the street and unemployment numbers low.

During the 2010s, the perception of labor market needs changed again in Norway. The quality and efficiency of HE was still seen as important to the international economic competitiveness of the nation, but other specific weaknesses of HE were pointed out. To stay competitive, there was a need for technological innovation and entrepreneurship. Because of incentives in the funding system there were relatively few candidates in science and technology, but too many candidates in the humanities and social sciences (Meld. St. 14 2020-2021; NOU, 2016:3, p. 6). In Norway as in several other countries, this has resulted in a transfer of resources to academic fields and programs where they are needed to attract more students. In addition to this transfer of resources to support sciences and technology, universities have worked to establish closer relationships with labor market actors through so-called labor market panels.

It is not easy to determine the effectiveness of the shifting emphases or policies pursued to make HE more relevant for labor market needs. Because the needs are complex and ambiguous, it is sometimes difficult to identify exactly what the driving factors behind the changes are. Again, broad international shifts in ideological beliefs seem to be important, but one can also identify some probable correspondence between different forms and emphases of HE expansion. Signals from the labor market itself are not always very clear, and when specific shortages are identified, it takes time to increase the supply of the candidates that are needed. What is stable is the need to justify educational programs in terms of labor market needs. Perceptions of such needs change as do the educational measures and the way in which they are organized. Over time new layers of measures have been added to previous ones, as perceptions and emphases have shifted. Justification of HE policies addressing labor market relevance has been driven quite obviously by utilitarian concerns, but as already has been pointed out, certain policies that favor research-based education and international academic competition nicely fuse utility claims and academic truth-and-merit claims.

Governance

HE governance in Norway like in other Nordic and European countries has changed fundamentally since 1980 (Bleiklie et al., 2017; Gornitzka et al., 2005; Kogan et al., 2006; Pardeise et al., 2009). Despite clear national differences, it is safe to say that the traditional collegial governance model (“republic of scholars”) has been dismantled. In its place a

new model, “the corporate enterprise,” has informed HE reforms since the 1980s, based on the idea that HE institutions should be managed like any other public or private enterprise (Bleiklie et al., 2000, 2017; Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000). These reforms have affected how HE institutions are managed and funded, how quality assurance and evaluation is organized, how work is organized and not least the fact that HE institutions have become integrated in standardized HE systems and supranational arrangements (Bleiklie et al., 2017). In Norway this process started rather modestly in the 1980s and 1990s, first with the emergence of a binary HE system and government incentives to universities that wanted to experiment locally with leadership and management reforms and a national program for management by objectives and activity planning that was mandatory for all public institutions, including those in the HE sector (Bleiklie et al., 2000).

The main elements of this “managerial revolution” were put in place in the early 1990s and the early 2000s. The University and College Legislation of 1989 and of 2003 (as part of the Quality Reform) introduced a standardized national system for leadership and governance. It replaced the bottom-up logic whereby elected academic leaders and elected bodies at all levels of the organization consisted of representatives from the academic and administrative staff and students and from whom they had their authority delegated. This was replaced by a top-down system by which leaders (most of them appointed, but also elected at some institutions) had their authority delegated from the leader on the level above their own (Bleiklie et al., 2006). The new model fundamentally changed the institutional underpinning of two core values of institutional autonomy and academic freedom in university governance. In the old collegial system, institutional autonomy and academic freedom were two sides of the same coin, where the collegium of professors enjoyed institutional autonomy to manage their common affairs and personal academic freedom to teach and do research as they deemed fit. In the new managerial system, institutional autonomy is entrusted to leaders who are increasingly expected to manage their academic staff and, if necessary, in accordance with organizational goals.

The distance these changes tend to create between leaders and staff has been exacerbated by two developments: institutional mergers that increased the distance between leaders and staff in the merged multicampus universities and the internal merger processes that have transformed the internal structure from small single discipline to large multidisciplinary departments. The new funding system introduced incentives based on research and teaching output and a national authority in charge of evaluation and quality assurance. The latter, by the acronym of NOKUT, is charged with institutional evaluation and accreditation and is thus in charge of both accreditation (e.g., determining which colleges fulfill the requirements to be upgraded to a university) and quality assurance and evaluation. The Research Council of Norway organizes national reviews of academic disciplines. When the institutions operate within a formal system, are expected to fulfill certain quality standards, and are ranked by students and by external bodies in international ranking exercises, a forceful element of competition has been introduced that affect the behavior of the institutions. They are more aware of and willing to invest in competitions for outside funding and prestige, as well as for well talented students and faculty (Bleiklie et al., 2017).

The concentration of power around top leaders of large and complex universities combined with the increased size, cost, political importance, and media visibility of the sector and each individual HE institution intensifies the attention and pressure on university leaders from media and politicians (Bleiklie et al., 2017). Outside scrutiny and pressure cover a wide range of issues, not just the quality of teaching and research but also how universities manage their funds and deal with their employees, students, and stakeholders. Political and university leaders thus face the increasingly difficult task of managing expectations and

demands, some of which are mutually exclusive. The understandable wish among institutional leaders to comply with demands and requests from important interest groups and stakeholders may represent a challenge to traditional academic values, when they are in possession of stronger means of power than before and a growing willingness to use them against their academic staff. Some examples from Norwegian universities the last years have demonstrated that institutional leaders at times have failed to protect basic academic freedoms: (a) in two cases at different universities when students demanded action against professors who expressed opinions they found unacceptable and (b) when several universities including major research universities accepted a clause in a research funding contract with the oil company Equinor in which the universities pledged to refer to the collaboration in positive terms. These cases became public when they were addressed by public media raising the issue of academic freedom and freedom of expression for university faculty. University leaders responded in ways that demonstrated confusion, wobbly leadership, and attempts to simultaneously satisfy all conflicting demands at the same time (Bleiklie, 2022). Given their broad agendas, multiple functions and complex structure, multiple stakeholders, increased outside scrutiny, and dependence on the environment, it is safe to assume that Norwegian universities will face difficult demands and expectations that represent challenges for institutional governance and leadership in the future.

The transformation of the university governance from a collegial to a corporate enterprise model was meant to equip universities for survival and progress in the international competition for academic excellence. This promoted a reconfigured academic power. Whereas academic power used to be determined by a positional hierarchy with the full professor as the powerful figure on top, power is now distributed differently. Norwegian universities are relatively democratic in a Western European context, but nevertheless, today institutional power is concentrated around leadership positions, whereas academic power depends on the resources and prestige an academic possesses in terms of research grants, prestigious publications, and position in important national and international networks (Bleiklie et al., 2017). The relationship between leaders and academics has changed from a collegial to a hierarchical, transactional relationship. Thus, an academic may enjoy freedom and influence in exchange for the money and prestige he or she can bring to the institution (Bleiklie et al., 2015).

The transformation of university governance is often hailed because universities have become more autonomous, and their leaders are therefore empowered to act strategically and position their institution much more effectively than in the old bureaucratic system. Autonomy, however, is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon and needs to be specified (De Boer & Enders, 2017). In the Norwegian context, it is usually emphasized that university leaders enjoy more budgetary freedom to allocate money as they see fit than in the previous bureaucratic system. However, university leaders operate in a highly structured environment where governments use a range of policy instruments from dialogue meetings, incentives and regulations that affect their decisions, and national priorities in terms of manpower needs and research priorities limit their space of action more than previously. Similarly, individual academics teach and do research in an environment that is increasingly standardized and regulated by international standards, national regulations, and institutional regulations (Bleiklie et al., 2017) as well as technological standards heavily influenced by multinational corporations (Pineiro et al., 2023).

Until now the focus has been on how universities are managed as national institutions. In addition, universities have also increasingly been integrated through European level standardized degree and transfer credit systems (the Bologna process), exchange programs (Erasmus), funding arrangements (Horizon, ERC), and labor market regulations. The latter

has affected Norwegian universities in fundamental ways, transforming the academic labor market from a national to a European labor market. In 2018 about 29% of the academic staff at HE institutions were foreign citizens (Wendt et al., 2021). This has led to changes that have had some highly appreciated effects on the universities, such as increasing the potential pool of talent from a small national population of a few million to a multinational population of several hundred million, increased mobility, and the exchange of ideas and competencies that come with it.

There have been developments that might signal negative reactions against internationalization and too many foreign citizens employed at Norwegian universities hinting at a possible renationalization of HE. One is the already mentioned removal of government subsidies of tuition fees for inbound and outbound exchange students outside the EU/EEA. Another sign has been a public controversy raised by university professors who complained of foreign colleagues who might not take part in the Norwegian public debate and fill their academic roles in a way that a Norwegian professor would do. The government has also emphasized the importance of strengthening Norwegian as an academic language in teaching and research. One might speculate that such controversies, events like Brexit, and right-wing populism might pose a potential challenge to internationalization and European integration of HE. Given the way in which European academic mobility is embedded in forceful structures of government level cooperation and coordination, there is little reason to assume that European integration will not continue to have deep and lasting effects on how politicians and institutional leaders will set their future priorities for systemic and institutional governance of Norwegian HE and research. However, internationalization at the global scale is a species far more exposed to the current winds of renationalization that one can observe in Norway and other European countries.

Futures

This review of trends of growth, systemic integration, academic drift, labor market relevance, and governance leaves an impression of dynamic development and change, as well as remarkable stability in terms of underlying values and the belief in the importance of high-quality HE and research. The future developments seem to depend more on the extent to which organizational forms and curricular emphases are seen as efficient and representative of the values of HE and research. If recent history and present events serve as reliable guides to the (at least near) future, different visions of HE appear to turn on pragmatic issues where utility claims tend to dominate in policy debates. Academic excellence and truth-and-merit claims have in periods fitted nicely with utility claims, when concerns for research quality and international competition have driven the national HE policy agenda. Conflict between utility and truth-and-merit claims was evident when the policy agenda was driven by concerns for short cycle education and immediate regional and national labor market needs. In these periods, academic excellence visions tend to be considered elitist, extravagant and detrimental to national priorities, such as immediate labor market needs. Based on the analysis of the five trends, the two scenarios can be specified a little further.

The academic excellence scenario is based on the idea that basic research is the core academic activity crucial to the two other missions—teaching and third mission activities—of the university. It is competitive and internationally oriented. Because high-quality

research often requires resources and disciplinary groups of a certain size, HE institutions should also be sufficiently large and resourceful to sustain high-quality research groups.

The national service scenario emphasizes geographic proximity and closeness between higher education institutions and their students as well as the local or regional industries and public institutions that need higher education and applied research services. It is oriented to regional and national needs, where educating professionals for public services and industry looms large. The scenario favors a decentralized HE system because HE institutions should be located “where the students live” and make sure they are able to meet local labor market and business needs.

While the scenarios reflect two sets of relatively recognizable preferences that have a long history, the question of how they may shape the future of HE remains. One can easily predict that they are likely to co-exist and inform future development to varying degrees. At the moment, policies seem to shift away from an academic excellence scenario and move toward a national service scenario. One may also point out how and to what extent the scenarios may inform future HE has been deeply affected by its growth and structural changes it has been going through. Considering this, what would a decentralization scenario of the current HE system entail? The system currently consists of far fewer and larger institutions than previously, and while the government has the legal right to establish new institutions, no indication exists that this is about to happen. Another option is to establish new campuses under existing institutions. Under the current legislation, this decision would have to be made by the institutions themselves, although the minister did pressure one university to reestablish a small teacher education institution that previously had been closed due to lack of student interest. A third option is to “decentralize” through budget allocations and divert resources away from the major research universities, reducing the funding differences among existing institutions. So far this seems to be the path followed by the current government.

Finally, we will discuss briefly (1) how changing perceptions of the utility of public universities and (2) their capacity and willingness to sustain and defend basic academic values such as academic freedom may affect the future of Norwegian HE.

Growth or fragmentation?

One of the tensions related to HE growth runs between two understandings of knowledge and their institutional underpinnings. HE expansion can be seen as a sign of unprecedented success and the support and confidence in the usefulness of the knowledge produced and transmitted by HE institutions. Yet, it is often claimed that universities have outlived their usefulness (Bleiklie & Byrkjeflot, 2002). However, different knowledge ideals, of *practical knowledge* and *theoretical knowledge*, were often mobilized in these cases: but in different ways and with different implications.

One type of utility claim is based on the idea that universities have failed to prepare entrants on the labor market with relevant knowledge for the jobs they are going to fill. While the claim was made to justify college expansion during the 1970s and 1980s, it was also used to justify university expansion and advanced disciplinary knowledge during the 1990s and early 2000s. Today, the tension is built into the HE system in two related ways. One is the traditional division between academic disciplines and vocationally oriented professional education. Here, the tension turns on the relation between disciplinary theory and method versus vocationally developed practices. Currently, there is a concern that while there are too few skilled workers, young people are flocking to universities.

Secondly, there is a similar distinction and tension between traditional disciplinary “curiosity-driven” and cross-disciplinary “mission-oriented” research, akin to Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge production (Gibbons et al., 1994). This tension turns on the relation between academic disciplines and more recent utilitarian policies pursued by the major national and European research funders to mobilize research efforts addressing societal challenges such as climate change or pandemics.

Academic disciplines are accordingly under utilitarian pressure from labor market interests, research funders, and institutional leaders. It has been claimed that it is not self-evident that universities should enjoy the position they still do in research and education. Research funders may approach research organizations and researchers that are less disciplinary oriented. The labor market need for skilled labor may be met by dropping mandatory university degree requirements for new job entrants (Fuller et al., 2022). Recognizing qualifications acquired through experience, on the job training, apprenticeships, vocational schools, or military service may tempt governments to save money and young people to enter the labor market earlier and increase the pool of available labor.

Potentially, this might lead to fragmentation whereby universities may lose potential student groups and research funding and researchers to outside educational and research organizations. In both cases, universities may be negatively affected in terms of reduced revenues, perceptions among politicians and in the public sphere that they are less useful. Yet, academic disciplines still define the criteria for academic qualifications, and academic disciplines still dominate the most prestigious research universities that receive most of the research funding including for projects addressing social challenges. Traditional universities have also demonstrated flexibility, combining disciplinary research in regular departments with cross-disciplinary research centers, while newer merged universities offer more thematic cross-disciplinary teaching programs and research profiles. Universities have so far proved able to combine cutting-edge cross-disciplinary research on major social challenges with applied cross-disciplinary research in addition to basic disciplinary research. Thus, the pressure against academic disciplines is noticeable. Nevertheless, the current situation points to a future where we will see further vertical differentiation within and among HE institutions. Research grants and academic prestige are likely to continue to drive this process.

Academic freedom and autonomy—a thing of the past?

One of the implications of the managerial revolution is the transition from bottom-up to top-down decision-making, changing the role of leaders from *primus inter pares* to a representative of higher authorities. Correspondingly professors, it is claimed, are no longer members of an academic collegium, but rather employees in the service of the enterprise. When leadership reform was introduced in 2005, it did not necessarily change the leadership behavior at universities, faculties, and departments much. Initially, appointed leaders tended to behave like elected leaders before them (Bleiklie et al., 2006). However, gradually they started to be aware of the increased power that had been extended to them. Mergers, whether it be of departments, faculties, or institutions, lent strength to the same process by increasing the distance between leaders and their previous academic colleagues.

To the extent this process is brought to its logical end, a university will consist of employees and leaders. Although the model of the university as a corporate enterprise is often used to indicate the direction in which university governance has developed the last decades, it is far from uniform (Bleiklie et al., 2017). Among and within Norwegian

universities, the authority enjoyed by academics vary considerably and is associated with research, in particular research funding (Krog Lind et al., 2019). Research funds as well as position in national and international research networks are resources that the individual professor can exchange with leaders in return for personal freedom and autonomy. The increasing importance of these resources is still likely to structure the hierarchical relations within academic institutions (Bleiklie et al., 2017). One development associated with external research funding that also has been observed in Norway is the changed demographic profile of academic staff, where there has been a surge in the number of subordinate and early career researchers compared to permanently employed professors (Krog Lind et al., 2019). Similarly, the research strength of universities in terms of funding and international prestige is still likely to differentiate between them and furnish top institutions with more autonomy and influence than the rest, as well as more academic freedom to its faculty. Thus, the question is not just to what extent universities have become corporate enterprises and professors have become employees. The question is also where this transformation takes place within the system and within academic institutions. The expectation is, therefore, that prestigious research will be the driver of differentiation and that academic freedom will still be enjoyed by top academics and autonomy by top research universities, while the corporate enterprise template makes its presence felt among the lower echelons of the systems and internally in the universities.

The tension between traditional ideals of academic freedom and autonomy versus top-down decision-making and leadership authority removed from the previous collegial context is likely to limit the space left for these traditional values. The hierarchical order at systemic and institutional levels that has emerged makes it more difficult to sustain these truth-and-merit-based values. However, there is still a general support for these values expressed by academic leaders and leading politicians and underpinned by national legislation. Recently, the value of academic freedom was held high and heralded in a government white paper (NOU, 2022:2). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the question of the conditions of academic work, freedom, and a host of related questions will be issues of contestation.

Conclusion

The trends discussed above are interrelated. Considering the discussion above, alternative visions of HE are likely to turn on a set of related issues where the role of research is at the center.

Until recently I have argued that Norwegian HE has been on a rather stable path toward further growth, integration, academization, and emphasis on (different interpretations of) labor market relevance. Thus, in recent decades the research excellence vision has enjoyed a stronger position than the national service vision in terms of budget allocations. The future of the scenarios seems to be more strongly affected by research growth. Research funding has been the main source of differentiation at all levels, among academic institutions and within academic institutions. Reduced research funding may be one way of promoting practical vocational knowledge and divert student attendance from higher degree toward short cycle programs. Research funding may be diverted to applied regional research organizations from research universities as they cease to be the most attractive place for young researchers. These alternatives that are more consistent with a national service vision of HE have so far arguably become part of the HE policy agenda the last couple of years.

When the minister of HE in 2022 proposed what he called “a complete makeover of the HE and research system” this may sound like a daring proposal and potentially alternative vision pointing toward a strengthening of a national service vision of HE. Elements of the new policies such as the “decentralization” policies, the push against too much use of English in research and teaching, are, at least in the short term, more symbolic, but nevertheless have stirred much debate. Other reforms, such as one regarding applied professional education, are still in the making. Still, only a few items on a long to-do list of the makeover have been specified so far. Following cuts and proposals to cut research funding, promises to strengthen professional education, two potential policy shifts are these: 1) simplifying application processes for research funding to avoid the huge amount of wasted work on research proposals that are unsuccessful 95% of the time and 2) dismantling the “counting regime” that used to document research quality, the research effort and serve as a basis for one of the funding streams to HE institutions. These proposals take aim at policy instruments that have been main pillars of the development of research funding and assessment in the last decades. Thus, we might see the start of an attempt to build new alliances inside and outside HE and research, to set new policy directions for the decades to come. In the short term, this signals a shift in which organizational funding and symbolic instruments are applied to better serve a national service agenda. While these shifts may sound drastic, a signal of a seismic shift, for Norwegian HE, potentially undermining the traditional cultural value of HE and an academic excellence scenario, it has so far resulted in modifications of organizational arrangements that may be more consistent with a gradual change process, the longer-term implications of which are still in the open.

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Declarations

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