System Integration and Institutional Autonomy
Enduring and emerging tensions in the governance of universities

UNICA Rector Seminar
"The Balance of Responsibilities.
University and Society in securing financial stability of higher education".
Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski
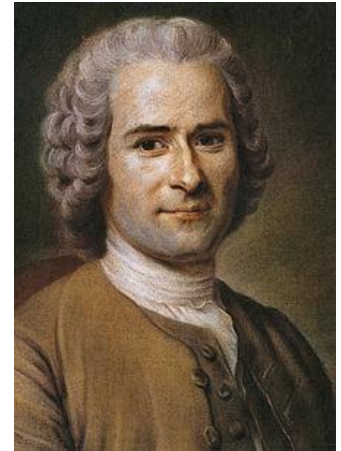27-28 September 2013

Peter Maassen, University of Oslo

System Integration and Institutional Autonomy in European Universities

1. Developments in Balance between System Integration and University Autonomy

2. Academic Recruitment

3. Effects of EU Research Funding

4. Conclusions

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

'Du contrat social ou principes du droit politiques' (1762)

"Government should prioritize the interests of its people over its own interests; and the people should be willing to accept limited individual freedom for effective political order"

Universities' Social Contract:
System Integration (Order & Control) vs (Limited) Institutional Autonomy

System Integration and Institutional Autonomy in European Universities

Starting-point:

- Governmental expectations concerning the role of universities in socio-economic development have changed

- In order to realize this role more effectively universities have to be reformed ('modernized')

- University autonomy central element in reforms

Studying balance system integration / institutional autonomy

Research project: European Flagship Universities; balancing academic excellence and socio-economic relevance (FLAGSHIP)

Focus on:

- Interpretation and actual use of (enhanced) institutional autonomy ('Living autonomy') at various governance levels, esp. at departmental level (Chemistry; Psychology; Public Health, Teacher Education; History)
- 'Flagship' universities in 8 small Northern/Western European countries (plus one 'control university' in Australia)
- Personnel policies and research excellence

Partners/links:

- University of Oslo
- Universities of Twente, Aarhus and Helsinki
- LH Martin Institute (University of Melbourne)

FLAGSHIP project

'Flagship university':

A comprehensive, research intensive university, located in one of its country's largest urban areas. A flagship university is in general among the oldest and largest institutions for higher learning of its country.

Selected universities (11 + 1):

Universities of:

Oslo, Bergen (Norway); Aarhus, Copenhagen (Denmark); Gothenburg, Stockholm (Sweden); Helsinki (Finland); Amsterdam (Netherlands); KU Leuven (Belgium); Zurich (Switzerland); Vienna (Austria)

University of Melbourne

Funding:

Norwegian Research Council; University of Oslo

Understanding university autonomy

Focus in university autonomy studies on changes in *formal* governance relationship state authorities – universities

However, studies on changes in *formal* governance relationship state authorities – universities cannot explain import aspects of the nature of intra-university change

Understanding university autonomy

'Living autonomy':

"The ways in which the changes in the formal governance relationship between state authorities and universities are perceived, interpreted, translated, operationalised and used inside each university involved."

Main Assumption Underlying Recent University Autonomy Reforms (as identified through reform analyses):

Strategic organisational 'actorhood' of more autonomous universities leads to "healthy" systemic diversity

Implying that:

- Professional university leadership and management will strategically identify a fitting 'niche' for the autonomous university

- Autonomous universities will more effectively accommodate the needs of various stakeholders

- Changes in a university system can be expected to stem from strategic adjustments to changes in the demands from society and clients, and to the strategic manoeuvres of competing universities.

Living autonomy:
Understanding University Robustness

Institutional perspective:

- Understanding of historical development essential

- University actors act in accordance with fairly stable principles, based on rules of appropriate behaviour for specific roles and situations

- Practices of university autonomy are not only read from the formal legal terms of operation, written performance contracts, or the outcome of negotiations; university autonomy has to be understood also from the roles that universities have forged for themselves

- Impacts of reforms dependent on how they match with and are absorbed by existing cultures, practices and institutional identities. The form of decision-making will be institutionally filtered, and in case of mismatch, rejected or decoupled from practice.

# Consequence of Enhanced University Autonomy for University Governance Structures

Shift from

University self-governance within academic domain

to

University steered by professional leaders, managers, administrators in executive structure

**Traditional University Governance Structure
in Continental Europe**

State

Board

Leadership

Administration

Academic domain
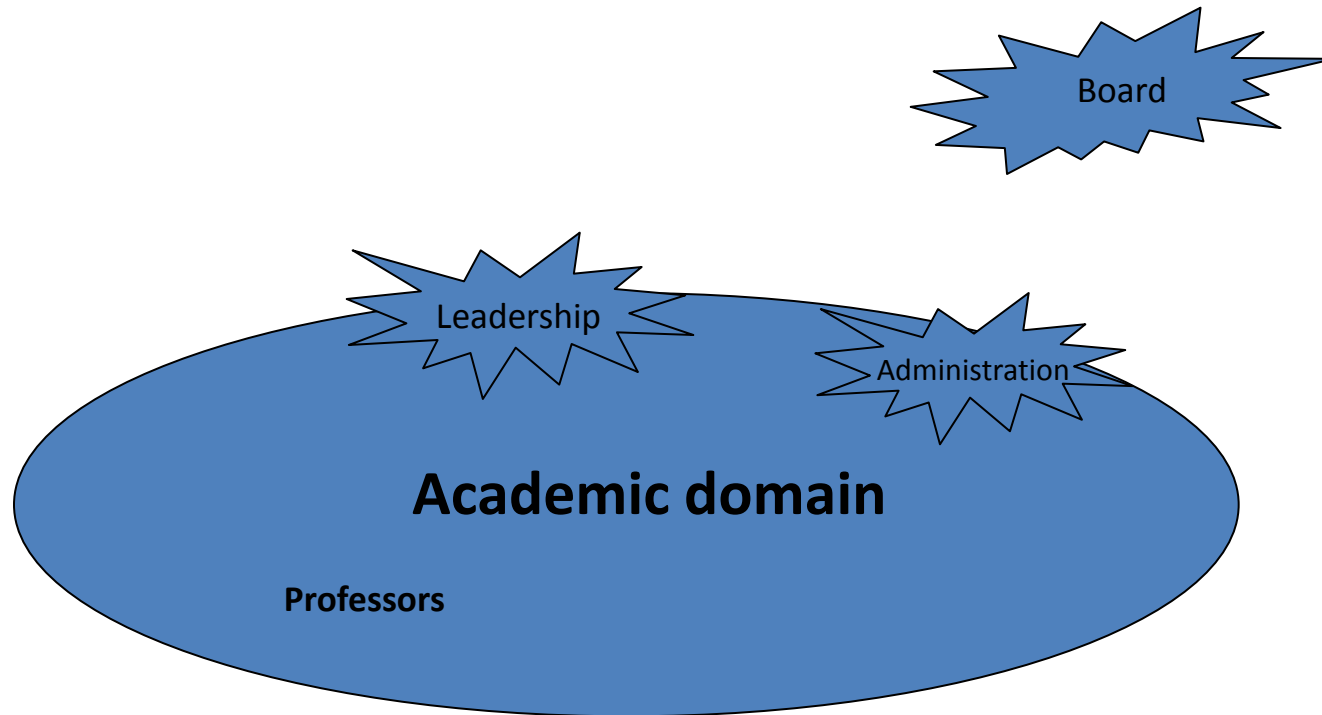
Professors

- Leadership by professors ('primus inter pares')
- Administration subservient to senior academic staff
- Board with double role (representing interests of government and university)
- 'Management' non-existent

State

Ex. Board

'Modern' University Governance Structure in Continental Europe

Leadership & management

Professional Administration

Executive structure

Formal autonomy

Academic domain

Academic administration

Living autonomy
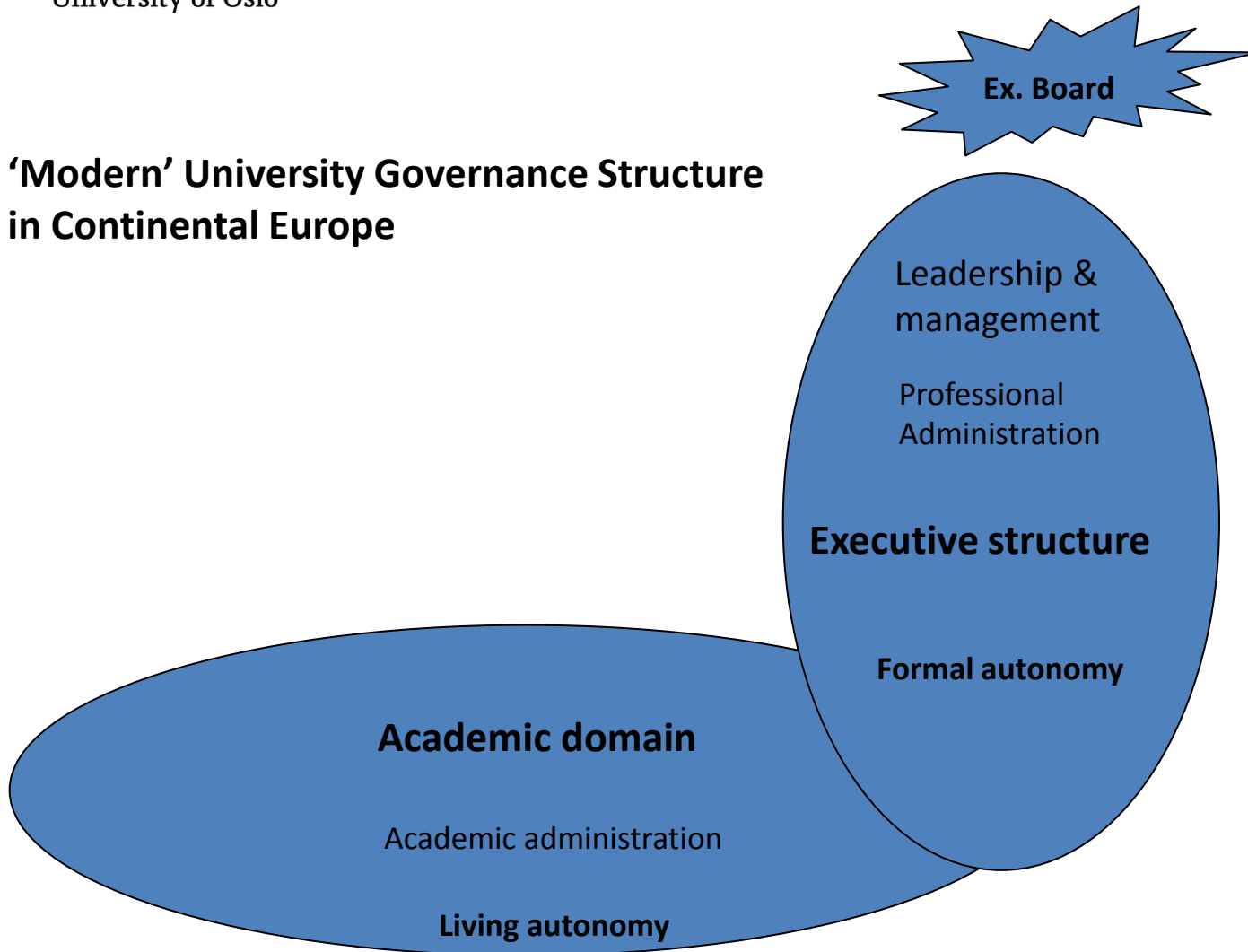
- Leadership by Board, Rector, Deans
- Professional administration decoupled from academic activities
- Executive Board
- 'Management Revolution'

Flagship project, Research area 1
Academic recruitment

Three main areas of academic recruitment

1. Tenured senior staff
2. Recruitment positions (PhD / Postdoc)
3. Other positions, incl. staff for externally funded research projects

Changes in academic recruitment: senior tenured positions

New policies

- Limited possibilities for entirely new tenured positions
- Shift from 'automatic' replacement to strategic room to manoeuvre for deans/heads of department
- Growing importance of external funding
- Internationalization

New stages

- Introduction of additional stages in academic recruitment: interview, trial lecture, research seminar, inquiry on references

New dimensions of assessment

- Social and personal skills, teaching quality, previous experience in teams, external informants' opinion. "Fit in" criteria

Changes in academic recruitment: senior tenured positions

New actors
- Traditionally: scientific committee (mostly external members)
- More recently: "interview committee" (mostly internal: departmental leadership, professors, administration), students at trial lecture.
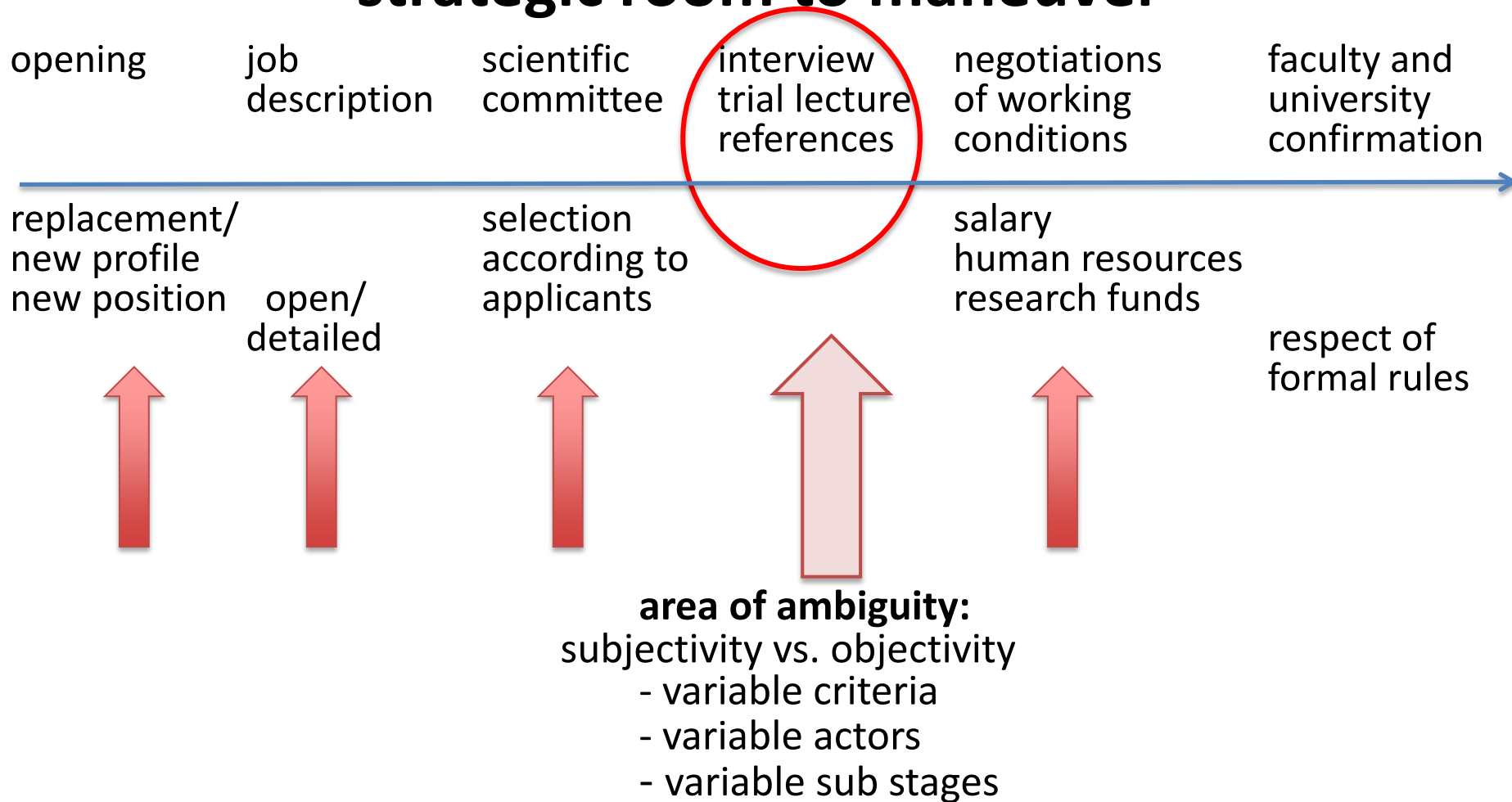
New role of heads of department /deans
- Decides on position with research group
- Has final word on job description
- Selects and leads interview committee
- Checks references (even face-to-face)
- Negotiates working conditions

Nonetheless:

personnel policy practices in essence still institutionalized and embedded in academic norms and values.

Sequencing of academic recruitment and strategic room to maneuver

opening   job description   scientific committee   interview trial lecture references   negotiations of working conditions   faculty and university confirmation

replacement/ new profile new position   open/ detailed   selection according to applicants   salary human resources research funds   respect of formal rules

area of ambiguity:
subjectivity vs. objectivity
- variable criteria
- variable actors
- variable sub stages

Coexistence of difference logics

1. **Reproduction logic**: replacing vacant positions
2. **Strategic logic**: following organizational objectives
3. **Competitiveness logic**: searching for talents
4. **Academic logic**: balancing university missions
5. **Fairness logic**: rewarding seniority, gender
6. **Power logic**: bargaining positions among research groups

Implications for academic leadership

- Striking a balance between managerial/bureaucratic and academic norms as both leaders and scientists.

- Moderated by
  - Discipline/field
  - Structural constraints: number of students, financial situation
  - Governance arrangements: integration of different actors in the process
  - Role of unions
  - Nature of 'co-determination'

- Proactive approach: resolve ambiguity and legitimize new criteria to enhance strategic leeway

- Culture/identity dimension: variation in how academic leaders make sense of their own role.

Flagship project, Research area 2:

Management of Research Excellence; effects of European Integration

How does the European dimension (science policy and research funding) play out at the university departmental level?

Working hypothesis

- Intra-university research units (groups, centers, projects) are the real actors of change

Implication:

Research units bypass institutional and national level by linking directly to EU programmes and structures

Departmental cases

Period: 2000-2012

- Documents: departmental, institutional, national, EU. Mainly regulations, strategic plans and reports/assessments

- Interviews: heads of department, heads of administration, senior professors

- Meetings with departmental leadership

Structural changes at Flagship universities

Institutional strategy

- Leading European research university

- Internationalization

- External funding for research crucial strategic area (status hierarchy)

Organizational structures

- Support units at all levels (central, faculty, department), before/during/after European projects

Personnel policies/incentives

- Challenge: recruiting top scholars on a temporary contract basis

- Infrastructure support

- Teaching time buy out

Structural changes within departments/faculties

Departmental/faculty leadership

- Balancing budgets & Matching funds; 'educational income of department co-funds externally funded research of departmentally located research units'
- 'Creative personnel policies' to handle externally funded projects' staff capacity requirements

Senior academics

- 'Various effects of national research funding system. From monolithic (Need to apply for alternatives, i.e. EU) to complacency (Why apply to alternatives?)
- Scientific and managerial expertise to deal with European funding

Implications at Departmental/Faculty Level

- Increasing role of Heads of Department/Deans in negotiating academics' readiness and willingness to apply for European funds, esp. ERC

- Competitive rationale is penetrating the departmental level. ERC funding is accentuating this dynamic.

- Increasing distance between 'elite' professors with European funds (esp. ERC) and/or prestigious national competitive projects/centers, and the other academic staff.

- As a result of an external research funding prestige hierarchy, in spite of thematic research programs and institutional priority areas, many academics are able to pursue and determine own research priorities within their department/faculty.

- Centrifugal dynamics at departmental/faculty level tend to fragment institutional/national policies.

  Quote: "Success in ERC more important for our department than cooperation with private sector"

Implications at Departmental Level (cont.)

Overlapping/competing logics at play:

      - academic logic: balancing teaching and research

      - competitive logic: awarding high performers

      - strategic logic: complying with broad organizational goals

Conclusions

1. Many factors (positive as well as negative) influence interpretation and use inside universities of enhanced institutional autonomy

2. Enhanced university autonomy opens space for increase of academic autonomy of specific staff members

3. Strategic University status more important factor in research management than in recruitment / personnel policies at faculty / departmental level; source of important challenges and potential tensions

Conclusions

4.   Growing 'mismatch' between professional administration in executive structure and diversifying academic activities in academic domain (aot joint degree programmes, LLL, MOOCs, distance learning, link to innovation, diversification in research funding)

– Quote: "*University administration has become more professional but at the same time less effective and supportive*"

5.   Increase of external funding in universities requires strategic decisions about ownership, responsibilities in personnel policies, and the use of 'matching funds'.

Conclusions

6.   In preferences and actions of 'elite academic staff' 'Socio-economic relevance' not always a priority in applications for external funding of research;

in general limited effects of Ministry's & central university leadership's focus on 'impact, engagement, relevance, innovation, etc.'

Thank you very much for your attention!

peter.maassen@ped.uio.no

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