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THE PATHS TOWARDS EXCELLENCE OF EUROPEAN FLAGSHIP UNIVERSITIES

The ongoing debate on the transformation of higher education has focused on the ever increasing competition between universities and national system, and on how waves of reforms have affected higher education. Global rankings, the EU agenda on the “Europe of Knowledge”, national excellence initiatives and new funding schemes have modified the higher education sector legally, normatively, but also ideationally and in practical ways. Against this backdrop, the FLAGSHIP project – *Flagship: European Flagship Universities: balancing academic excellence and socio-economic relevance* – was funded by the Research Council of Norway between 2012 and 2015, and coordinated by ARENA Centre for European Studies and the Department of Education at University of Oslo, Norway. FLAGSHIP aimed at investigating how public research universities were adapting their management structures and processes in order to cope with external pressures such as demands for being scientifically excellent as well as societally relevant. One of the main expectations in the beginning of the project was that universities were challenged in trying to balance such conflicting objectives. This means, it was expected flagship universities to be *either* scientifically excellent in their research activities or societally relevant in their teaching tasks.

Empirically, FLAGSHIP was designed in an alternative way: eight smaller European countries were selected: the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden), the Low countries (Belgium/Flanders and the Netherlands), and Austria and (German-speaking) Switzerland. All these countries share similar characteristics as their higher education systems are rather well endowed financially, perform well in international perspective and within the European Research Area. In these countries 11 flagship universities were chosen according to the project working definition of a flagship university, that is, a *relatively large research intensive public univer-*

sity, located in an urban area, old and comprehensive when it comes to its teaching and research portfolios. We analysed and compared these 11 higher education institutions through documents such as strategic plans, auto-evaluation reports, national statistics. Around 60 interviews were conducted with academic leaders, senior professors and heads of administration in four discipline-based departments: Chemistry, Psychology, Public Health, and Teacher training.

The choice of the 4 departments resonated with the theoretical assumptions underlying the project. In fact FLAGSHIP assumed that in order to observe organizational change in universities, the department (or school) is the relevant unit of analysis. Departments are organizational structures embedding the discipline (or the disciplinary field) thus providing opportunities and constraints for discipline-based knowledge production processes. The core university activities of teaching and research are indeed usually organized within departments. In other words, the FLAGSHIP project argued that the “living autonomy” of the university, i. e. *the enacted practices and identities of universities*, can be best observed within those organizational units that host disciplines as the core foundations of knowledge production processes within academia.

The main findings of FLAGSHIP only partly confirmed the initial expectations.

First, it appears that **academic leaders, academics and chief administrators do not perceive a strong tension between excellence and relevance.** In their view, on the one hand excellent science is or will become soon societally relevant, hence there is no contradiction, but more an issue of sequence in time. On the other hand, the selected disciplines were interpreted and enhanced more theoretically or more practically depending on the specific sub-field and the specific academic. This different subsets of disciplines constituted together a sort of ecology, un-

derstood and practiced rather organically within the department. Finally, more recent and successful disciplines such as Public Health and Teacher Training are considered as “naturally” practice oriented and impacting society in a direct manner.

Second, **strategic planning in Flagship universities has become a rather uncontested reality** for academics and academic leaders. While different combinations of bottom-up and top-down processes give the possibility to staff to get involved in the definition of the strategic objectives, once in place, strategic plans do not seem to have great influence on academic daily activities.

Related, **governance structures and decision-making processes vary significantly in the observed universities and departments, but all in all do not seem to affect the work and the performance of academic leaders and senior academics.** The latter carry out their research activities, apply for funding to external agencies, take care of their research groups and of their doctoral students rather autonomously. Equally, there is extensive variety in how departments are organized. Some have chairholders, i. e. full professors that lead rather hierarchically all staff attached to their chair – from associate to assistant professors, from teaching assistants to PhD students. Some have flatter structures with more horizontal hierarchy and earlier tenured positions for lecturers and researchers.

However, so much variety in governance structures and strategic processes within departments did not shed light on the observed differences in research performance. Such difference were significant both between national higher education systems and between universities. By taking the success rate in research project applications to the European framework programs (we looked at the past Framework Program 7 and the ongoing Horizon 2020), it can be observed that some countries, but more importantly, **some flagship universities perform far better than the others.**

The systematic comparative analysis of organizational and institutional characteristics, as well as of ideas, identities and understandings emerged from the semi-structured interviews indicates that **personnel policies are a core issue in managing flagship universities and in sustaining their paths to excellence.** Those universities and departments that have in place a clear and transparent academic career system,

where each stage is defined and whose requirements in terms of competences, experience, publications etc. are unambiguously illustrated to everybody, point to more efficiency, effectiveness and enhanced performance. Such personnel policies allow each junior and/or non-permanent academic to understand the criteria to fulfill for further progress in their academic trajectories. In this way informed decisions can be taken as of one’s own professional career with respect to what it takes to become tenured, and when, as well as climbing the ladder to full professorship and academic leadership positions.

The uncertainty and insecurity of academic careers has been a central issue in scholarly debate on the changing dynamics of the academic profession. It appears clear that many universities, including flagship universities, need to **modernize their human resource management and put in place systems that provide professional development support, clear career steps and transparent and comparable criteria for promotion.** This would be beneficial not only to individual academics, but also to universities willing to attract and retain the best performers.

Flagship project website

<http://www.sv.uio.no/arena/english/research/projects/flagship/>

1. Selected publications from the Flagship project.
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4. Gornitzka A. and Maassen, P. (2017 forthcoming, guest editors) Special Issue on Flagship universities, *Higher Education Quarterly*, 71 (3).
5. Morphew C. C., Fumasoli, T. and Stensaker, B. (2016) Changing missions? How the strategic plans of research-intensive universities in Northern Europe and North America balance competing identities, *Studies in Higher Education*.
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