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### Universities as providers of lifelong learning: A case study about implementation environments within universities in a Nordic EU member state.

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#### Abstract

A parliamentary act from 2000 established Danish universities as providers of lifelong learning and the introduction of user-paid part time studies became successful in relation to participation. Adult learners began to apply in high numbers and the universities got access to a new source of income.

However, the Ministry of Education stated in April 2012 that the existing educational practice needs development. The government is after a decade with the existing act not pleased with the educational offers to the labor force provided by the universities. The work experiences which adult learners have earned on the labor market (non-formal and informal learning) are often not included in the educational practice provided by university staff and the offers to adult learners differ often little from the offers to young learners (18-24 years).

#### Keywords

administrative principles, adult learning, implementation environments, policy instruments, universities

#### 1.0. Introduction

The relation between educational *policy* and educational *practice* has since the Lisbon Strategy (2000) been an issue for universities in EU member states. The transnational EU strategy linked to thinking in *knowledge economy* is depending on a change of educational practices within higher education because universities are producers as wells as providers of research results (Keeling 2006). But how can universities in an effective way make their staff change their daily practices and deliver prescribed *learning outcomes* as wanted by their national policy makers? A clash between

the traditional (national) *autonomy* of universities and the new (transnational) public policies is embedded here.

The universities in EU member states are since the Bologna meeting in Prague (2001) expected to transform themselves into providers of lifelong learning but an open question remains a decade after: Are universities actually practicing lifelong learning? Or, to be more specific: Are the university staff of today able to think in learning processes for adults arriving from the labor market? Are the earned work experiences being integrated in the educational practice at universities?

The Lisbon Strategy as well as the Bologna Process is public policies formulated on a transnational level, supposed to be implemented on a national level, and then practiced by universities placed in national contexts. However, what is on the agenda in the daily educational practice of universities? Is university staff a decade after the passing of the Lisbon Strategy able to differentiate between the *freshmen* coming directly from secondary schools and the adult learners arriving after years in the labor force? How far is institutional educational *policy* from institutional educational *practice*?

It is a difficult discussion because policy making within education is nowadays mostly based on thinking in learning processes while educational practice mostly is based on thinking in teaching processes. This is of course a hypothesis because the written guidelines for university staff is everywhere reflecting *the concept of learning* which in all policy papers published by the European Commission is repressing *the concept of teaching*.

However, most of the oral discussions among university staff engaged in the daily practice seem to be dominated by the concept of teaching. What are the colleagues discussing? The accounting of teaching hours (contact hours) are done carefully because they are planning units while the learning hours for students (which is the core in thinking in ECTS-point) are not mentioned much. It seems as if the new target group of adult learners wanting a university degree on part time conditions often is treated as freshmen. Their adulthood and their work experiences are handled by the universities in a way which implies that the educational practice is inherited from the practice of past centuries. In fact: The *paradigm shift* to thinking in adult learning expected before the passing of the Maastricht Treaty (Tuijnmann 1992) has been implemented as educational *policy* but not fully implemented as educational *practice*.

The theoretical approach used in this paper is picked from political science because the problems related to the thinking in learning processes and the admittance of adult learners can be defined as a political problem for the society and not for the individuals only. The problems are from a society perspective causing a weakening of the national competitiveness and we will in this case study boil them down to be *implementation* problems:

The Danish universities are having difficulties with the implementation of a practice based on thinking in *adult learning* even though the Nordic countries decided to leave the thinking in *adult education* a decade ago (Ehlers 2006). Our hypothesis is that the change of educational practice on the levels 6, 7 and 8 within the National Qualification System (NQF) is poorly implemented when we examine the existing part time studies organized for adult learners. This is an eye opener, because the educational practice for adult learners in offers that are not research based (NQF-level 3, 4 and 5) are according to our hypothesis having a higher standard due to the research and the development work done in the '90s.

The empirical foundation for the study is mainly policy documents produced by the Danish ministry of Education and included in a *case study* of the design on national and institutional level. Currently there are eight universities in Denmark and since 2001 they have provided part time courses for the labor force according to the act on further education for adults (*Videreuddannelsessystemet for voksne*); a system diligently developed by the Ministry during the '90s (Mortensen 2001) and launched in the start of the millennium.

This system (supposed to be working in parallel with the ordinary system) is described in a government report which was published by the ministry in April 2012 (Regeringen 2012). The signal in this report was a rather harsh critique formulated as a requirement of development work on master of education, where 1) the users' needs are in focus, and where 2) the educational supply is not reflecting the mainstream education system (Regeringen 2012, p 25). How can we explain the emergence of the implementation problem? What may a historical as well as comparative study tell us?

Launch of.

### **1.1. Research questions**

- 1) Which administrative principles and which policy instruments were employed by the Ministry of Education in the 2000 *policy* design?
- 2) Which administrative principles and which policy instruments were applied by the universities in their 2001 *practice* design?
- 3) How can the inadequate implementation environment 2001-2012 be explained?

### **1.2. Conceptualization**

Two concepts are essential for this case study which is based on a political science approach: *Administrative principles* and *policy instruments*.

The first concept covers the first step in a *policy design* (May 2003) and can be described as the selection of the guiding administrative principle that the government want to follow after an act is passed by parliament. The three administrative principles available are according to Thompson (2003): 1) Hierarchy, 2) Market, and 3) Network.

The second concept has defined by Vedung (1998) as “the set of techniques by which government authorities wield their power in attempting to ensure support and effect or prevent social change”. He differentiates between: 1) Regulations, 2) Economic Means and 3) Information.

### **1.3.Methodological considerations**

The case study is historical because the development within a decade is examined and discussed. However, it is also comparative because the educational practice at the top levels of the NQF is compared with the educational practice at the bottom levels of NQF.

The Nordic countries in general are effective in their implementation of acts related to adult learning on the bottom levels of the NQF (Ehlers 2011). The main argument here is the findings when the national *implementation environments* were compared decade by decade. The Nordic governments did actually use a flexible approach in relation to the needs of adult learners: Most of the public authorities (including the Danish) did within each decade revise the administrative principles as well as the instruments (Ehlers 2011). However, the criticism expressed in 2012 is directed towards the universities 1) as providers of adult learning and 2) as designers of an educational practice.

### **2.0. Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework is first of all delivered by May (2003). He introduced the concept *implementation environment* which in this case study is combined with *the integrated implementation model* (Winter 2010). Grahame F. Thompson (2003) has discussed the relevance of the administrative principles *hierarchy, market and network* and Evert Vedung (1998) has published a study of the instruments *regulation, economic means and information*.

The influence from May, Thompson, Vedung and especially the integrated model developed by Winther can be coined as a description of three steps in a story telling about the relation between higher education in Denmark and the thinking in knowledge economy: 1) the transnational *formulation* step in 2000 (the Bologna Process (from 1999) combined with the Lisbon Strategy), 2)

the national *implementation* step in 2001 (the policy design after the passing of the act on the further education system for adults as well as the design of a new practice at the universities, and 3) the national *evaluation* step in 2012 (the concluding remarks in the statement delivered by the Ministry of Education).

### 3.0. Empirical studies

A comparative study of adult learning policies in the Nordic countries has documented the high quality educational supply on NQF-level 3, 4, and 5. The Nordic countries have developed quality education and courses for adult learners, the funding has been sufficient and much research was initiated in the '90s (Geiger et al. 2012).

Another comparative study is adding more facts to the background for the success story: The Nordic governments became more and more effective in their implementation of adult learning policies. They used varying administrative principles and policy instruments within the last four decades. It is demonstrated in the case of Denmark that in the decade 1991-2000 Network was the dominant administrative principle and Economic Means the dominant policy concept. However, changed happened in the following decade where Market took over as dominant administrative principle while Economic Mean remained the preferred instrument. The hypothesis for the development in the period 2011-2020 is (according to the case study) that Network and Economic Means will prevail (Ehlers 2011).

A comparison of the *implementation environments* at the bottom and at the top of the NQF must take into account that universities as providers are having an extensive degree of *autonomy*. This is not the same for the non-research-based provision which in Denmark is much influenced by the social partners. However, the government, the providers and the social partners are on the same page in relation to educational supply at the NQF-level 3, 4, and 5 and the Market as the dominant administrative principle is regulated in formal and in-formal ways.

It is also worth mentioning the empirical study by Laura Louise Sarauw (2011) who examined the re-writing of study regulations done within Danish universities. She documented the resistance to change of the educational practices among university staff. It may be added that Sarauw found a great deal of diversity when she compared the *implementation environments* at different universities.

A report from the National Accreditation Council (Akkrediteringsrådet 2012) pinpoints two quality issues in the part time educational offers for adult learners: 1) the missing connection to current research and 2) the missing link to work life experiences.

### 3.1 Discussion

It seems to be a fact that the educational practice supplied by Danish universities to adult learners 2001-2010 was almost identical to the educational practice offered to freshmen studying at the same NQF-levels. In a political science perspective a discussion of this issue can be based on comparison of two *implementation environments* existing side by side between 2001 and 2010: One for educational supply at NQF-level 3,4, and 5 and another for supply at the NQF-level 6, 7, and 8.

The administrative principle was Market and the policy instrument Economic Means – in both cases. But the *implementation environments* were different. The universities were acting autonomous while the non-university providers had limited autonomy because the social partners were in control. This may explain the difference - why the education practice within universities did not adapt to the new task but kept on doing business as usual.

Another problem according to the statement from the Ministry is the relevance of the content. The social partners were able to make sure that the non-research-based supply of courses etc. was relevant to the labor market while there were no mechanisms to ensure relevance of the research-based educational supply, mainly because of the traditional autonomy (dominant before the university reform of 2003).

After 2003 the universities are being more tightly regulated. The instrument is detailed contracts between the Ministry and each of the eight Danish universities. The use of this instrument may support employment of the Network principle. Another instrument described by Vedung (1998) is Information. It should be noted that the Ministry offered very limited Information when the act was implemented in 2000.

The empirical study done by Sarauw (2011) may shed light on the *implementation environments* within universities. A decree from the Ministry said that work experience should be included in the educational practice. How did the university staff prepare themselves for the change of educational practice? She documents that university staff and their course leaders did not know much about the reform agenda. However, she did not explicitly study the part time educational supply to adult learners. The administrative principle was probably Network and the instrument used inside universities seems to have been Regulation (the re-written study regulations became instruments).

However, there are good arguments in favor for including Information much more in the *implementation environment* inside the eight universities. And it seems as if the special features of adult learning is not a part of the curriculum in the mandatory training courses for assistant professors.

#### **4.0. Concluding remarks and recommendations**

The three research questions can be answered one by one:

##### **4.1. Which administrative principles and which policy instruments were selected by the Ministry of Education in the 2000 *policy* design?**

The dominant administrative principle in 2000 was Market. This principle was rather unknown by the Danish universities who were used to Hierarchy. The dominant instrument became Economic Means and not Regulation as in the past.

More use of Network and Information is recommended.

##### **4.2. Which administrative principles and which policy instruments were selected by the universities in the 2001 *practice* design?**

The dominant internal administrative principle in 2001 was Network while the instrument was Regulation.

More use of Hierarchy and Information is recommended.

##### **4.3. How can the poor *implementation environment* 2001-2012 be explained?**

The policy design for the 2000 act followed the traditional pattern. However, Market became an administrative principle for implementation for adult learning within universities thus replacing Hierarchy. In relation to policy instruments: Information ought to be a mandatory instrument for the Ministry as well as for the universities. And information about the university reform of 2003 (which has effectiveness as intention) was not in existence.

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