



## **Making sense of university ideas**

**Exploring how ideas influence management practice  
and perceptions in Danish universities**



Lise Degn

PhD Dissertation

## **Making sense of university ideas**

**Exploring how ideas influence management practice  
and perceptions in Danish universities**

Politica

© Forlaget Politica and the author 2014

ISBN: 978-87-7335-185-7

Cover: Svend Siune

Print: Fællestrykkeriet, Aarhus Universitet

Layout: Annette B. Andersen

Submitted 25 April 2014

The public defense takes place 22 August 2014

Published August 2014

Forlaget Politica

c/o Department of Political Science and Government

Aarhus University

Bartholins Allé 7

DK-8000 Aarhus C

Denmark

# Table of Contents

Preface.....	11
Chapter 1: New and old ideas about universities.....	13
1.1 On the changing perception of universities.....	13
1.2 The overall idea - research focus and questions.....	15
1.3 Perspectives on university management and governance - operationalizing the research question .....	16
1.3.1 Ideas about the governance and management of universities.....	16
1.3.2 How managers make sense - intra-organizational dynamics .....	17
1.3.3 Entering the production room - how ideas impact academic practice .....	19
1.4 The Danish miracle - considerations of Denmark as a case .....	20
1.4.1 The Danish system - central characteristics .....	20
1.4.2 Aarhus University.....	21
1.4.3 Aalborg University.....	22
1.5 Dissertation outline.....	23
Chapter 2: Making sense of ideas - development of a theoretical framework.....	25
2.1 Introduction to theoretical chapter.....	25
2.2 The ideational turn.....	26
2.3 Ideational institutionalism .....	26
2.3.1 Why ideas?.....	27
2.3.2 What is an idea - and how can we study it?.....	29
2.4 Travelling and translation - how ideas move .....	31
2.5 Where travelling ends... ..	33
2.6 ... Sensemaking starts .....	34
2.6.1 What is sensemaking? .....	35
2.6.2 Sensegiving.....	41
2.7 Institutional theory, translation of ideas and sensemaking .....	41
2.8 The framework and its application.....	43
Chapter 3: The study of sensemaking and ideas - methodology and research design.....	47
3.1 The social construction of meaning .....	47
3.2 Analytical strategy and design .....	49
3.3 Case study research and quality assessment.....	50
3.3.1 Considerations of quality measures and assessment.....	51
3.4 Research strategy .....	52
3.4.1 The phenomenographic inspiration.....	52
3.4.2 Case selection .....	53

3.5 Empirical data collection .....	54
3.5.1 Interviews .....	55
3.5.2 Documents .....	57
3.5.3 Focus group interviews.....	57
3.5.4 Coding strategies.....	58
3.6 Methodic pitfalls and challenges .....	59
Chapter 4: Translating Governance Ideas in Danish Higher Education .....	61
Chapter 5: Sensemaking, sensegiving and strategic management in Danish higher education .....	81
Chapter 6: Making Sense of Management: A study of Department Heads' Sensemaking Processes in a Changing Environment.....	97
Chapter 7: Identity constructions and sensemaking in Higher Education – A case study of Danish Higher Education department heads.....	119
Chapter 8: The sensemaking processes of academic staff in Danish universities .....	135
Chapter 9: Addressing the theoretical and empirical contributions.....	151
9.1 Travelling and transformational ideas.....	151
9.2 Identity and identification.....	154
9.2.1 Identification – group, organization or discipline?.....	155
9.3 Theoretical contributions.....	157
9.3.1. The typology – a framework for further analysis.....	157
9.3.2 Applicability of the theoretical framework.....	160
9.4 Perspectives for future research .....	161
9.5 The structural conditions of managers – policy implications.....	162
English summary .....	165
Dansk resumé .....	167
References.....	169
Appendix 1: Interview guides.....	183
Appendix 2: Example of coding process .....	191



List of Figures:

Figure 1.1: Dissertation outline .....	24
Figure 2.1: Theoretical framework.....	44
Figure 3.1: Informants for qualitative interviews and their distribution on organizational unit. ....	56



## Preface

This dissertation is to a large extent about sensemaking, as was the process of producing it. In the course of my PhD project, I have been continually trying to make sense of my self – as an academic, as a colleague and as an individual – a process which has at times been difficult, occasionally rewarding, but always educational. I have in my years as a PhD student been fortunate enough to have been surrounded people who have helped me make sense of this process, and for that thanks is due.

First and foremost, I am grateful to Niels Mejlgaard, my main supervisor and Centre Director at The Centre for Studies in Research and Research Policy at Aarhus University, where the research project has been carried out over the past 3½ years. Niels has been part of my project from the very beginning and I am ever thankful for his support, qualified advice and for his ability to stand my – at times constant – interruptions and questions. His good humor and reassuring attitude has been a great help, when demands of academia have seemed overwhelming.

I also owe a great deal of thanks to my co-supervisor, Finn Hansson, who has stuck with me since my days at CBS – and even into (his own) retirement. Finn's comments, suggestions and knowledge on the Danish higher education system and its history have been indispensable in the process.

Special thanks must go to Kaare Aagaard for spending more time and effort reading, giving feedback and discussing my work with me, than could ever be expected of him. I am very grateful for all his help and remain certain that my dissertation would be of much lesser value without it.

Over the 3½ years I have been employed at the Centre for Studies in Research and Research Policy, I have come appreciate the academic environment, as well as the social tone and environment. The latter is in no small part due to centre secretary Jane Irming, to whom I am greatly indebted, not only for all the practical assistance during my project, but also for her good spirit and caring nature.

Over the years I have benefitted greatly from the collaboration I have had with Mads P. Sørensen, whose insights and vast knowledge on philosophical, historical and practical matters, have provided for many an interesting and entertaining discussion. I look forward to our collaborations in the future and remain sincerely grateful for all his help.

Thanks also go to the PhD group for lively discussions of both professional matters, as well as personal ones. Particularly, I owe Sanne Haase a great deal of thanks for sparring and sharing during the final phase of my project –

and for tolerating my frequent attempts to get her to join my procrastination projects. In general, I am indebted to the entire Centre for all their help and support during my PhD – I hope very much that we will be able to continue our collaborations in the future.

In 2012, I was fortunate enough to spend a couple of months at the University of Oslo, in the HEIK (Higher Education: Institutional Dynamics and Knowledge Cultures) group. I am very grateful to Professor Peter Maassen for the opportunity to visit and for the fruitful and very beneficial discussions we had during my stay. Thanks also go to Mari Elken, Martina Vukasovic, Jens Jungblut, Antigoni Papadimitriou, Kristi Barcus and Tatiana Fumasoli for the academic input – but certainly also for making my stay in Oslo both lots of fun and very memorable.

On the personal level, the PhD process has highlighted once and for all that I owe so much of what I am to my family. First and foremost, I am grateful to my parents, who continue to be support me in all my endeavors. They remain a source of inspiration in the way they approach life and live it to the fullest – even in the face of obstacles. Thanks and gratitude also goes to my sister, whose support means more than I can say. Additionally I have been blessed with an extended family in my in-laws, to whom I am sincerely thankful for all their support – and not least their help with family logistics.

Finally, as the foundation for everything, my sincerest thanks go to my husband Jacob and my son Axel, for always tolerating and supporting me – even through the unreasonableness and the absences. At the end of the day, they are the reason it all makes sense.

# Chapter 1: New and old ideas about universities

## 1.1 On the changing perception of universities

If you want something new, you have to stop doing something old.  
— Peter F. Drucker

Peter Drucker's famous statement about management quite accurately describes the setting of the research project at hand, namely universities in a time of reform. Universities are today expected to 'do something new', as their production of knowledge, knowledge bearers (students) and applications of knowledge (innovation) is increasingly perceived to be vital to national economic prosperity, welfare and competitiveness. They should be key players in the global knowledge economy (Amaral and Magalhães 2004; Välimaa and Hoffmann 2008) – a role that is markedly different from the ivory tower of the (distant) past. Particularly the EC and OECD have over the past decades proven to be vital carriers of new ideas, that link the higher education sector in general – and universities in particular to the global and national economies (EC 2005; OECD 2009). These linkages have entailed increasing pressure on universities in terms of rising demands for accountability, strategic capacity, responsiveness, and responsibility in order to get the universities to 'stop doing something old'.

The demands could be described as a general 'economization' of the view of higher education systems (Gornitzka and Maassen 2000) or more broadly as an expression of the increasing penetration of New Public Management ideals in the public sector (Christensen and Lægroid 2001; Pollit 1990). There is little doubt that new ideas about what a university is and should be are abundant in both scholarly discourse and the political ditto, or that many of these impulses and discursive shifts – and the reforms seem to follow in their wake – can be seen as conflicting with highly institutionalized notions and values of the academic system. These shifts and potential conflicts have been described and conceptualized in a variety of ways, e.g. in terms the rise of 'the evaluative state' (Neave 1988; 1998; Bleiklie 1998), as a shift towards a 'triple helix' configuration of the relation between state, universities and industry (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff 1997) and as a sign of 'academic capitalism' (Slaughter and Leslie 1997). Similarly, Olsen (2005) de-

scribed these conflict-lines by way of a matrix model, highlighting how there are 4 substantially different 'visions' of a (European) university, namely the 'Republic of Science', 'the Representative Democracy', 'the Political Instrument' and 'the Service Enterprise', each with distinct logics, values and rationales. These visions illustrate the vast array of possible interpretations of the role and function of universities in the knowledge society.

As a consequence of these new demands, expectations and visions of what universities are and should be reforms of higher education systems seem to have become the order of the day, not least in Europe. Even though there are national variations (de Boer and File 2009), general reform features seem to be: strengthening the role for central government in the determination of goals and procedures, professionalizing and empowering managerial structures in universities, the introduction of external stakeholders into the internal governance structures, e.g. via boards with varying degrees of power, and a generally increasing 'corporatization' of universities, e.g. represented in the rising use of management by objectives and results (Bleiklie and Kogan 2007; de Boer and File 2009; Amaral et al. 2003; Maassen 2008). Together these measures indicate a thorough rethinking of the state-institution relationship, from traditionally being based on mutual trust to being founded on contracts and other control measures (Gornitzka et al. 2007; Kwiek 2005).

Denmark is far from an exception to the general 'rule of reform'. The Danish higher education system has been subjected to a number of more or less comprehensive reforms over the past decades (chapter 4; Aagaard 2011; Aagaard and Mejlgaard 2012; Degn and Sørensen 2012); particularly in the new millennium where reform intensity reached a preliminary peak. A comprehensive reform was implemented in 2003, transforming the institutional and legal status as well as the governing model of the universities. Focus was particularly on institutional autonomy and stronger management in order to enhance accountability and flexibility. This reform was followed up with a series of mergers in 2007, changing the university landscape from 12 to 8 universities. This process also involved the previously autonomous governmental research institutions, embedding them within the universities and granting them a new status as – in most cases – university departments (Bloch et al. 2012). Following an evaluation of the 2003-reform and the 2007-mergers, the University Act was amended in 2011, particularly focusing on strengthening the role of the rector, by enhancing the discretionary power of this position (for a more elaborate analysis of the reform period, see chapter 4 and Degn and Sørensen (2012)). The Danish reform process indicates a changing perception of the ideal role and governance of universities, but as Bleiklie and Kogan point out:

(c)hanging beliefs and ideals do not necessarily lead to new practices. In order to understand the extent of change beyond the initial ideological shift, one must observe actual structures and behavior at various levels within higher education institutions (Bleiklie and Kogan 2007).

The present research project attempts to follow this proposition and investigate the way that ideas about higher education affect and transform actions and perceptions within higher education institutions.

## 1.2 The overall idea - research focus and questions

Despite the generally increasing interest in the power of ideas (Béland and Cox 2011; Mehta 2011; Schmidt 2008), analyses focusing on ideas in higher education systems are scarce. Menahem's (2008) analysis of the Israeli higher education system and Aagaard's (2011) investigation of the development of the Danish funding structure are notable exceptions to this rule, but (institutional) change in higher education has often – more or less explicitly – been studied from a more classic new institutional perspective (e.g. Olsen 2005; Stensaker 2004; Morphew 2009). The main reason for this approach is the basic assumption that universities are the quintessence of highly institutionalized organizations (Brunsson and Olsen 1993; Weick 1976; DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1977), i.e. constructions whose mode of function, rules, and cognitive structures have become so institutionalized that they take the shape of ideals. These ideals are objectivized and torn from the context in which they were shaped, in order to function as guidelines for behavior (Meyer and Scott 1983; Selznick 1957; Brunsson and Olsen 1993). Organizations can in this perspective be seen as institutions that are equipped with the capacity for action, e.g. in the form of competence- and resource structures (Torfing 2005, 47).

This perspective may however be criticized for emphasizing stability and for assuming that 'the concepts of "organizations" and "institutions" stand for continuity and predictability' (Brunsson and Olsen 1993), thus rendering change a consequence of exogenous shocks or revolutionary events (Blyth 1997; 2002). In the present research project an initial objective has been to escape the focus on 'constraints' and 'inertia', which is so predominant in both older as well as newer variants of institutional theory, by looking at how ideas might act as transformational forces in both policy processes and individual behavior. The strategy employed here is to place ideas 'ahead of' in-

stitutions and not the other way around, thus applying a more dynamic perspective to the study of changing circumstances.

In order to investigate the 'actual structures and behavior at various levels within higher education institutions' as suggested by Bleiklie and Kogan (2007) above, the research project focuses particularly on how ideas transform as they interact with organizations and individuals. The way in which ideas are adapted, translated and made sense of inside higher education institutions is the primary source of 'wonder'; a 'wondering' which has framed the approach and has led to the formulation of the overall research question:

How do ideas move into and through Danish higher education institutions, and what are the implications for sensemaking and action?

This question, which forms the basis of the research project as a whole, is operationalized and divided into sub-questions in the following sections, where the link to existing literature is also discussed and the argument for choosing Denmark as a case is outlined.

## 1.3 Perspectives on university management and governance – operationalizing the research question

The overall aim of the research project is to provide an in-depth perspective on how new ideas have travelled into a national system and how they enter into complex and dynamic relationships with old, institutionalized ideas, affecting practice and perceptions along the way. The five sub-studies that contribute to achieving this aim are presented below in an operationalization of the overall research question. How the findings of the sub-studies lead to an illumination of the general research question will be discussed in chapter 9.

### 1.3.1 Ideas about the governance and management of universities

The first part of the overall research question concerns how ideas move into Danish higher education institutions. Following the discussions in the previous sections, the research project more specifically investigates ideas about the governance and management of universities; an area which has received increasing amounts of attention in the literature over the past years. Studies have targeted themes such as the changing relationship between central



government and higher education institutions (e.g. Neave and Van Vught 1991; Etzkovitz and Leydesdorff 1997), the role and fate of institutional autonomy and academic freedom (e.g. Nokkala and Bladh 2014; Habermas 1987), the introduction of new control mechanisms in higher education governance (e.g. Huisman and Currie 2004) as well as the policy context and the differing policy formulations across Europe (e.g. de Boer and File 2009; Amaral et al. 2003).

Taking the lead from these strands of research the first sub-study (chapter 4) investigates how ideas about higher education governance, management, and the role and function of higher education institutions have transformed and been translated into policy over time. The study thereby attempts to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on the dynamics of higher education policy, with a perspective on how the translation of e.g. ideas about institutional autonomy and academic freedom have been shaped over time, and on how the new control mechanisms in higher education governance emerge as valid solutions to perceived problems.

The central argument is that in order to understand how the present policy translation has come to take the form that it has, we need to look at how problem definitions and policy solutions have changed over time. This will enhance our understanding of how specific constructions become 'naturalized', taken for granted, and thus become premises for future translations (Luhmann 2000; Simon 1957).

### 1.3.2 How managers make sense - intra-organizational dynamics

A specific objective of the present project is to explore and illuminate the intra-organizational dynamics that influence and is influenced by travelling ideas, with a particular eye for the way managers<sup>1</sup> make sense their chang-

---

<sup>1</sup> The term manager is used consistently and purposefully throughout this project, when referring to department heads, deans and rectors in universities, as opposed to the term leader. In Danish there is only one term – ledelse – which covers both management and leadership; a linguistic challenge, which within the framework of the present project can also be seen as a sensemaking/sensegiving challenge, as the choice of the term manager may evoke certain frames with the reader, thus influencing the process of making sense of the findings. The choice was however made early on to insist on this term; a decision founded in namely the connotations that it entails. The formal positions of department head, dean and rector in a Danish context exactly entail a (rather large) number of 'managerial tasks', and the choice not to use the term leader – or the less than eloquent term leader/manager – is

ing environment. Universities are as mentioned often described as highly institutionalized organizations, and the scripts and norms for appropriate behavior are therefore assumed to be quite resilient to change. The second, third and fourth sub-study are therefore all concerned with investigating the intra-organizational dynamics and target the section of the overall research question, which concerns how ideas travel *through* higher education institutions. The main aim in the three studies is to explore how the perceptions and experiences of individual managers may shed light on the possibilities of 'being a manager' inside a modern university in complex circumstances.

First, spotlight is turned on the top tiers of the internal university management structure, focusing on rectors and deans. Several studies have been concerned with top level university management (e.g. Bargh et al. 2000; Birnbaum 1992; Engwall and Lindvall 2012), e.g. by attempting to measure the importance of academic reputation of top level manager (Goodall 2009).

Targeting this level of management, the central aim becomes to investigate how the top tiers of the new internal management structures make sense – both to themselves and to others – of the changing circumstances and ideas about higher education. This is a theme described and studied by e.g. Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991), Gioia and Thomas (1996) and more recently Eckel and Kezar (2003), who have all suggested that sensemaking and sensegiving are key aspects of a strategic change process in higher education institutions. However, where these studies investigated strategic change as an intentional process, initiated by the top level managers of the institutions (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991), or how the top level managers managed successful change processes (Eckel and Kezar 2003), the second sub-study (chapter 5) explores how rectors and deans handle the pressures from political translations as well as internal translations of ideas, both in terms of their own self-image and in terms of how they seek to legitimize their own translation of central ideas.

At the department level, we find the object of inquiry of sub-studies 3 and 4. These studies target the same group, namely the middle managers (department heads), which are seen to play a key role in change processes and in the translation of external pressure (Meek et al. 2010). Danish department heads are 'production floor' managers, charged with the direct personnel management tasks, as well as the strategic, administrative and academic management of their departments. In addition to the challenges posed by

---

thereby not an indication of a lack of 'leadership elements' in the roles, but choice made to highlight the managerial elements in the role.

this vast portfolio of management tasks, Danish department heads also face a transition from being academics to being full-time managers. As such, department heads are seen as key research objects when the aim is to explore the dynamics between institutionalized and thus resilient ideas, and new contending ideas. The question investigated in the two sub-studies (chapters 6 and 7) is thus: *how the transition from academic to manager, and the new demands and responsibilities of the role, affect the self-perceptions and identity work of the department heads –and if this has behavioral implications.* The aim of the two studies is to contribute to discussions on ‘managerialism’ in higher education (Deem 2004; Deem et al. 2007) and changes in academic identity as a consequence of the new ideas about higher education (Henkel 1997; 2000; 2005).

### 1.3.3 Entering the production room – how ideas impact academic practice

Finally, the fifth sub-study opens up the project towards new research arenas by focusing on how the individual academics, and academia as a collective, make sense of their changing environment. The study thus explores what happens to ideas about higher education governance and management when they ‘hit the production floor’.

Studies of changes in the academic identity (e.g. Henkel 2000; 2005) and the academic profession(s) (e.g. Macfarlane 2010; Whitchurch 2008) have indicated that new ideas and rationales in universities may have implications for the behavior of academics. This connection is also the focus of the final, exploratory study, as it attempts to answer the question of *how academics in Danish universities make sense of their changing circumstances, and how this affects their perceptions of their organization, their managers and of themselves.*

The final sub-study (chapter 8) relates to the overall research question by looking at how ideas and translations of university managers are retranslated and made sense of on the production level. Additionally, the study points to interesting paths that may be pursued in further studies, e.g. in terms of the behavioral responses and strategic actions of the academics in the face of change.

## 1.4 The Danish miracle – considerations of Denmark as a case

The Danish higher education system serves as the overall case under scrutiny in this research project, but why is it interesting to look closer at the Danish case as opposed to any other European national case? The answer lies in the historical development of Danish higher education policy, the intensity of the reforms, and in the somewhat singular or paradigmatic characteristics that have come with this.

The Scandinavian countries have been described as ‘reluctant reformers’ in terms of implementing New Public Management reforms in the public sector (Christensen and Lægreid 2007), but there seems however to be very little reluctance left in the new millennium reforms of the higher education system. In other words, Denmark seems to have gone from being somewhat hesitant in terms of political intervention in the internal management structures of the higher education institutions to being a frontrunner in this field – an argument also mentioned by Pinheiro and Stensaker (2013). In comparison with similar countries, e.g. in Scandinavia, Denmark has gone very far in its attempts to ‘modernize’ or mobilize the universities in the new knowledge economy. Additionally – albeit not necessarily linked with this development – Denmark has over the past decade experienced significant success in terms of research performance, and there has even been talk of ‘the Danish miracle’ with reference to Öquist and Benner (2012), who compare the Danish rise in research performance with that of the Nordic neighbors.

Denmark is in this way seen as an interesting case in that it provides insight into a system that has undergone massive transformations over a short period of time, and may thus function as an illustrative example, which might reveal or highlight key elements of a wider phenomenon (Pavlich 2010).

### 1.4.1 The Danish system – central characteristics

The Danish higher education system comprises 8 universities, varying from relatively small and specialized institutions like the IT University, which has around 570 people employed and 2.000 students, to large and comprehensive institutions, like University of Copenhagen – with 9.000 people employed and 38.000 students. All universities are research- and teaching institutions and some also have tasks related to research-based consultancy.

The present configuration of the university system is a result of the 2003 University Act, which granted the universities status of self-owning institutions or ‘independent institutions under the public-sector administration’ (Ministry

of Science, Technology and Innovation 2009). The universities are still under ministerial supervision and the relationship with the ministry is formalized through development contracts, wherein the individual university and the ministry in dialogue set up performance targets.

The internal governance and management structures of the universities are characterized by a high level of professionalism and are partially inspired by a corporate profile. The highest authority in the institutions is the Board of Governors, which consists of a majority of external members, e.g. from the private sector, from other (international) higher education institutions or from the political system, and a minority of internal members, i.e. student and staff representatives. The Board of Governors appoints the Rector, who is charged with the overall management of the university. In general the management structure is based on an appointment system, as opposed to the previous election system. (Degn and Sørensen 2012; Aagaard and Mejlgaard 2012).

With regards to funding, the Danish system is based on a mix of state-funding (basic funding for research, performance based funding for education (the taximeter system), competitive grants) and external funding sources. In general, the new millennium has seen an increasing emphasis on the competitive grants and the external funding sources at the expense of basic funding (see e.g. Aagaard (2011) for an analysis of the development of the Danish funding structure).

#### 1.4.2 Aarhus University

The first university chosen for more in-depth studies is Aarhus University, which was founded in 1928 as the second university in Denmark. At its inception, Aarhus University was founded as a 'classic' university, modelled on the German Humboldtian ideal, which focused on both research and teaching. Aarhus University is today a comprehensive university, with four main academic areas (faculties): *Science and Technology*, *Business and Social Sciences*, *Arts* and *Health*. Each of these main areas comprises very diverse departments, in Science and Technology e.g. ranging from areas such as Agro-ecology and Animal Science, to Physics and Astronomy, to Food, or Engineering (Aarhus University<sup>1</sup>). The university is the second largest university in Denmark<sup>2</sup>, as it employs approximately 8.000 people, and hosts over 40.000 students.

---

<sup>2</sup> Aarhus University has claimed that it is – following the mergers in 2007 – now the largest Danish university, measured by the number of students.

Aarhus University expanded to its present size when it merged with the previous Herning Institute of Business Administration and Technology (in 2006), Aarhus School of Business, the Danish Institute of Agricultural Sciences, the National Environmental Research Institute and the Danish University of Education (in 2007). Following these mergers Aarhus University began a comprehensive reorganization exercise in 2011 termed 'the academic development process', which attempted to create: 'a single unified university and reducing these internal boundaries by reducing the number of organizational units significantly' (Aarhus University2). The process included merging the nine pre-existing faculties and schools, to the four main academic areas mentioned above. Simultaneously, the administrative structure of the university was transformed, attempting to establish joint administrative structures (e.g. in terms of economy, human resources, IT-systems and student administrative systems) across old institutional borders (Aarhus University2).

### 1.4.3 Aalborg University

The second case university is Aalborg University, which houses approximately 25.000 students and 5.000 employees. Aalborg University was inaugurated in 1974 (as Aalborg University Centre) and was characterized by what has come to be known as *the Aalborg model*, i.e. on the principle of problem based learning, and by its close connections with surrounding society and in particular with its regional collaboration partners. The 'University Centre' status was a result of the integration with other higher learning institutions, such as technical colleges, engineering academies, and business school, which had not been part of the university structure (Aalborg University1; Huisman et al. 2002). This indicates that Aalborg University has always been oriented towards the technical sciences and engineering, but Aalborg University has also from its inception strongly emphasized interdisciplinarity, which is reflected in its current organization. The main structure consists of four main faculties<sup>3</sup>: *Humanities, Social Science, Natural Science and Technology and Medicine*, and 20 departments – a number of which are 'cross-faculty', i.e. they 'belong to' two or more faculties (Aalborg University1)

Aalborg University has in recent years expanded its 'area of operations', as campuses have been established both in various parts of Denmark, i.e. in the Copenhagen area and in Esbjerg in the south of Denmark, where the educational focus is particularly on e.g. chemical engineering and mechanical engineering (Aalborg University2).

---

<sup>3</sup> As well as the Danish Building Research Institute (SBI).

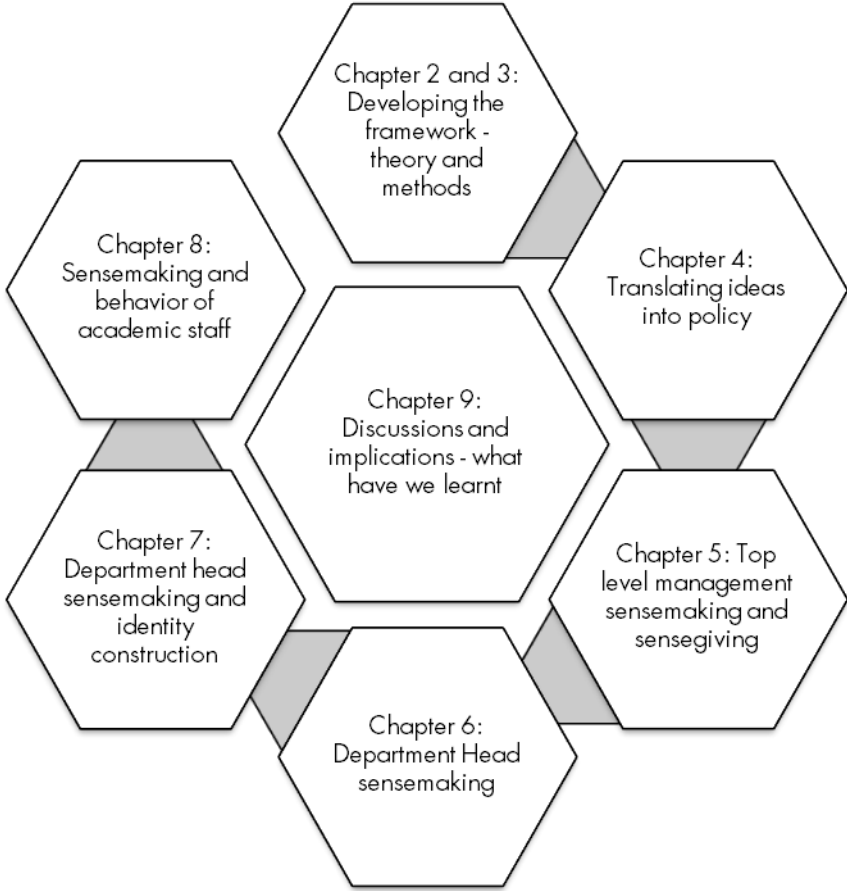
## 1.5 Dissertation outline

In this chapter I have discussed the main research interests of this research project and the scholarly debates in which it places itself. The remaining chapters will lay forth the framework that I apply to study these questions and the actual analyses and findings.

In chapter 2 the theoretical framework is outlined and discussed. Emphasis is in this chapter on providing readers with a comprehensive view on the theoretical assumptions and arguments that underpin the research project in general. Particular attention is paid to the development of a comprehensive theoretical framework and to discussing how this framework is applied in individual studies. Chapter 3 describes and discusses the methodological considerations that shape the construction and perception of knowledge in the project – as well as the more ‘hands-on’ methods applied. The chapter thus deals with both the ontological and epistemological premises of the study, and considerations of case selection and data collection.

In chapters 4-8, the individual sub-studies are presented in the form of five scientific articles, and in chapter 9 the findings from these individual studies are discussed. The concluding chapter attempts to draw together central, cross-cutting findings and discuss how the individual studies contribute to illuminating the overall research question. Additionally, the applicability and contributions of the theoretical framework are highlighted and contextualized. A final aim of the concluding chapter is to point to interesting avenues for further research. The outline of the dissertation is visualized in Figure 1.1 below.

Figure 1.1: Dissertation outline





## Chapter 2: Making sense of ideas – development of a theoretical framework

### 2.1 Introduction to theoretical chapter

The present research project lies at the intersection of many different research fields as the discussions in chapter 1 indicated. The attention to policy ideas points to political science and theories on policy processes, where the focus on the changing environments of higher education institutions directs attention towards institutional or organizational theory. At the same time the project aims to explore how university managers deal with these changing environments, which is commonly studied within organizational sociology or organizational psychology. The conversation that the project attempts to engage in can in this way be seen as multi-voiced, as each of these research disciplines tend to target different areas, pose different questions and approach such questions in different ways and with different methods.

When engaging in such a multi-voiced conversation, the challenge becomes to find one's own voice and develop a theoretical framework which targets the *specific* research interests, if these interests cut across the harmonies of established theoretical traditions. This chapter outlines the theoretical sources of inspiration of the present research project and discusses how they may sensibly be connected in a general framework, targeting the questions posed in the previous chapter. The theoretical ambition is thereby to develop a framework, which is sensitive both to the external conditions of an organization or an individual, and to the intentional and non-intentional agency of individual and collective actors. In the following sections I will describe the development of such a framework and discuss how it has framed the research design and approach of the overall project and the individual sub-studies.

The chapter thereby outlines my contribution to the 'ongoing conversation' (Weick 1995) on how to explore and understand change and complexity in organizations and policy. Initially, ideational institutionalism, the concept of translation, and the sensemaking perspective are introduced and key delimitations are described. Subsequently the potentials and challenges that are entailed in the coupling of the perspectives are discussed.

## 2.2 The ideational turn

The research question indicates a particular interest in ideas and how ideas influence change processes; an interest, which is mirrored in contemporary, conceptual developments within the social sciences. Over time, many turns have been announced in the social sciences: the interpretive turn (Rabinow and Sullivan 1979), the linguistic turn (Rorty 1992), the cultural turn (Ragin 2000), and the narrative turn (Czarniawska 2004) are a few of the more recent examples. Not all of these turns have been hairpin bends that radically changed the way social studies were perceived and conducted, but they have all turned the spotlight on new areas of interest and brought unique perspectives into the larger framework that is the study of social phenomena. This is also the case of what has been called *the ideational turn* in the social sciences (Schmidt and Radaelli 2004; Blyth 1997; 2003; Béland and Cox 2011), which has highlighted the importance and explanatory power of ideas in studies of change. The following sections will demonstrate how a distinct ideational approach has developed within the framework of (new) institutional theory, and how this approach is relevant in studies of higher education systems and their actors.

## 2.3 Ideational institutionalism

The ideational approach is not a clear-cut theoretical approach, but an amalgamation of many different perspectives, whose common characteristic is an emphasis on *ideas* as having intrinsic importance to policy making and action. In other words, the general agreement is that ideas matter (Schmidt 2008; 2011; Béland and Cox 2011; Mehta 2011) – how they matter is another matter.

The background for this new emphasis on ideas was the tendency in established new institutionalisms - rational choice, historical and sociological/normative new institutionalism - to view change as an exceptional event, triggered by revolutionary, exogenous shocks, rather than as incremental, internal processes (Schmidt 2011; Blyth 1997; Lieberman 2002; Tannenwald and Wohlforth 2005). Such a perspective on change as exceptional is founded in the perception of institutions as constraining, stable and invariant. Several scholars however became increasingly unsatisfied with the static nature of this perspective, and its inability to predict and explain change in the absence of shocks and crises (Campbell 2010). The dissatisfaction led to a focus on the concept of ideas and the dynamic inherent in this concept in studies of institutional change (Blyth 1997; Berman 1998;

Campbell 2002). In the course of the 2000s this conceptual development gradually gained acceptance as an actual branch of new institutionalism, distinct from the traditional forms. This 'fourth new institutionalism' has been termed 'constructivist institutionalism' (Hay 2006) or 'discursive institutionalism' (Schmidt 2002; 2006; 2008), emphasizing that conceptualization is still ongoing, and perhaps even that it might be premature to conclude that only one 'new institutionalism' has emerged.

In the present project the term *ideational institutionalism* (Hay 2001) is preferred, as it highlights the common notion that binds the new perspectives together, namely ideas. Despite their differences, ideational scholars insist that ideas hold significant analytical potential and should be taken seriously in analyses of institutional and political change processes, rather than be dismissed either as a smokescreen for material interests, as they are within rational choice new institutionalism, or as reflections of path dependent norms which is the common conception within historical and sociological institutionalism (Béland and Cox 2011; Blyth 1997; Mehta 2011; Menahem 2008; Rueschemeyer 2006; Tannenwald and Wohlforth 2005; Schmidt 2006; 2008).

Ideational institutionalism is as mentioned still in its burgeoning stages and therefore subject to continuing articulation and development, which is reflected in the somewhat inconsistent conceptualization of the basic terminology<sup>4</sup>. The common point of departure is the assumption that *ideas matter*, but this assertion still calls for reflection on the delimitations of the concept of ideas and the analytical consequences of this. The following sections will discuss the conception of the term idea, the central concepts of ideational institutionalism and its demarcations.

### 2.3.1 Why ideas?

Regardless of the perception of the point of origin, all ideational scholars believe that ideas should be studied because they are a pivotal factor in political behavior, and thus cannot be ignored when attempting to understand political processes, or subjected to other factors like material interests (Braun 2006; Mehta 2011). Prominent examples demonstrating the importance of ideas are Berman's study of Social Democratic movements in Sweden and

---

<sup>4</sup> One could argue that this inconsistency is not a result of the infancy of the approach, but merely a trademark of all theoretical approaches within social sciences. Other, more established and rooted, theoretical perspectives have struggled similarly with reaching a consensus on proper definitions, e.g. institutionalism on the concept of institutions and rational choice on the concept of rationality.

Germany, highlighting how different ideas lead to different political choices in the two countries, in spite of the common ideological basis (Berman 1998), and Marc Blyth's analysis of the economic ideas of the twentieth century and how these ideas make institutional change possible (Blyth 2002). In sociological and organizational research the examples of ideational analyses are scarcer. An example of an attempt to bring ideational analysis into a sociological framework however is Daniel Béland's effort to combine the ideational perspective with gender analysis (Béland 2009).

These studies illustrate that ideas have considerable impact on the political behavior of actors and on the institutions that surround them. Following this, ideational institutionalism, as it is understood within the present framework, has some implicit assumptions of power, even if these are not always explicitly addressed. Power is understood as what has been called discursive power (Schmidt 2008) i.e. as a phenomenon that arises and emerges in discursive practices; as a force rather than a possession (Sørensen and Torfing 2001). Ideas are thereby powerful as they 'help' us determine what our interests and goals are and how we can meaningfully work towards these goals:

...ideas shape how we understand political problems, give definition to our goals and strategies, and are the currency we use to communicate about politics. By giving definition to our values and preferences, ideas provide us with interpretive frameworks that make us see some facts as important and others as less so (Béland and Cox 2011)

This emphasizes why ideas become critical to study, namely that they are the fabric of institutions and thereby the filter through which we see ourselves. Consequently, ideas about higher education shape the way I view myself as a researcher, and as an actor within the academic system. They shape how I see my goals and legitimize certain strategies to obtain these goals. They make it possible for me to be understood by my peers and indeed allow me to identify who my peers are. If we wish to understand human (organizational) behavior, it is vital to look at the ideas that help shape this behavior<sup>5</sup>.

---

<sup>5</sup> Power relations and how power is exercised by way of ideas and translation is not an explicit focus point of the present project. For discussions of how power is conceptualized in ideational institutionalism (and the related perspectives) see e.g. Schmidt (2008; 2010), Berman (2011), and Mehta (2011).

### 2.3.2 What is an idea – and how can we study it?

Within the ideational framework there are somewhat diverging perceptions of the object of study, namely ideas. In a recent review of ideational approaches within social sciences, Béland and Cox (2011) demonstrate that areas such as international relations, comparative politics, American politics, political economy, and different strains within sociological research has in varying degrees adopted the ideational framework. This proliferation of the ideational framework is bound to lead to disparity in the conceptualization, not least because of the difference in research objectives.

This disparity however also leaves the approach quite open to new conceptualizations and thereby new research areas, such as higher education studies. However in the lack of a clear theoretical conceptualization of the concept of 'ideas', I must first put forth my own understanding and the implications thereof.

#### 2.3.2.1 Ideas as beliefs

One of the first to work explicitly with the concept of ideas was Peter Hall, who spoke of policy paradigms as:

a framework of *ideas* and standards that specifies not only the goals of policy and the kind of instruments that can be used to attain them, but also the very nature of the problems they are meant to be addressing (Hall 1993, 279, emphasis added).

Many scholars have taken Halls concept of policy paradigms as a point of departure for their delimitation of the concept of ideas (e.g. Braun 2006; Menahem 2008; Walsh 2000). Hall's point is that ideas function as frameworks, which allow actors to view themselves and their circumstances, possibilities and interests in certain ways. Campbell (2002) elaborates by claiming that ideas are: 'theories, conceptual models, norms, world views, frames, principled beliefs, and the like'; a somewhat all-encompassing definition which still leaves room for delimitation. Emmerij, Jolly and Weiss have proposed a more narrow definition of ideas as: 'normative or causal beliefs held by individuals or adopted by institutions that influence their attitudes and actions' (2005). This perception of ideas as normative and causal beliefs has been adopted by other ideational institutionalists, who have highlighted that by viewing ideas as beliefs, emphasis is put on the cognitive element, i.e. that ideas are constructed in the minds of actors and connected to the material world by way of interpretation (Béland and Cox 2011, 3). Carstensen points to another vital characteristic of ideas by claiming that:

there exists a dynamic relationship between new and old ideas: the process of coupling the two changes both ideas, because the original idea is viewed in a new light, and the new idea is changed to fit with the old idea (Carstensen 2010, 850).

Ideas are thereby not context-free, but historically embedded and in many ways path dependent – they build upon older ideas, which create ideational streams (Carstensen 2010). This argument will be further elaborated in section 2.4, dealing with the travelling and translation of ideas.

Following these conceptualizations, ideas are in this research project seen as *normative and causal beliefs, working within a dynamic network of other ideas, establishing goals and means by which these goals can legitimately be obtained*. This definition underlines the constructivist nature of the approach<sup>6</sup>: ideas are constructed and reconstructed continually and there is no 'essential core' to any idea; an idea emerges and is given meaning within and by way of its context and articulation.

### 2.3.2.2 Ideas and institutions

A vital conceptual clarification regards the relationship between ideas and institutions. The two concepts are closely linked, but it is important to emphasize that ideas and institutions are not equivalent concepts. In the quote above, Emmerij, Jolly and Weiss specified the relationship between ideas and institutions by claiming that ideas are *held by individuals* or *adopted by institutions* (Emmerij et al. 2005, 214). Ideas are thereby seen as distinguishable from institutions. Béland and Cox (2011) elaborate this distinction by arguing that: '[a]s ideas give rise to peoples' actions, and as those actions form routines, the results are social institutions' (2011, 9). Ideas make us act and thereby potentially form institutions, and the relationship between ideas and institutions is thereby seen as dynamic and mutually constitutive (Campbell 2004), in the sense that both act as restricting structures and as enabling constructs (Schmidt 2011).

This notion distinguishes ideational institutionalism from historical institutionalism where institutions are viewed as deterministic. In ideational institutionalism, ideas, as opposed to institutions, are seen as dynamic in the sense that they are not stable and delimited entities, but subject to change as they are considered, redefined and connected with other ideas. Simultaneously, as Carstensen (2010) pointed out, ideas also change the context in which they emerge, potentially causing institutional change.

---

<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 3.

### 2.3.2.3 Ideas and ideologies

Another distinction worth clarifying is that ideas are not ideologies or perhaps more accurately: ideas are not *simply* ideologies. Berman, inspired by Knight (2006), claims that ideologies are a 'subset of ideas, broad 'worldviews' that provide coherent interpretations of the world and guidelines for dealing with it' (2010, 105). This notion of ideology is significantly distinct from the Marxist, materialist concept of ideology, and should not be seen as a 'masking' of material interests imposed by the ruling class. Ideas, and thereby also ideologies as a variant of ideas, 'provide mental frameworks within which human beings can order and understand the entire world in which they live' (Berman 1998, 20).

This perception of ideologies as a subset of ideas, indicate that ideas can be seen to emerge on different levels of generality: policy solutions, problem definitions, and public philosophies (or zeitgeist) (Mehta 2011; Schmidt 2008, chapter 4). *Policy solutions* describe ideas that operate on the level of specific policy areas; ideas that propose specific solutions to a specific political problem/issue, e.g. a system of appointed leaders as opposed to elected ones. *Problem definitions* describe how ideas work at the level that underpin policy; ideas can be identified as the beliefs that provide the legitimacy of the policy solutions, e.g. understanding institutional inertia as a product of rigid and unprofessional, collegiate management structures. Finally ideas can operate on the level of *philosophy*, the deep core beliefs that underlie both policy and program, e.g. understanding the higher education system as an instrument in service of the national system, as opposed to a more institutional perception of the higher education system with an independent *raison d'être* (Olsen 2005).

The tripartition of ideas should not be perceived as implying a 'trickle-down' movement, i.e. an assumption that ideas 'begin' at the level of philosophy and diffuse down into policy and programs, but rather that there is an interaction between levels that go both ways. Policy solutions may well influence both programs and more broad public philosophies – as well as vice versa (Mehta 2011). Ideologies can thereby be understood as a network of ideas that are grouped together to form a coherent story about the world and how to engage with it.

## 2.4 Travelling and translation – how ideas move

A central assumption in the present framework is that ideas thereby tend to move – both on levels of generality as described above, but also over space

and time; an assumption which is reflected in the overall aim of examining the ways ideas travel into and through the Danish higher education system. As mentioned in the introduction ideas such as New Public Management, accountability, institutional autonomy, strategy, and efficiency have travelled through European higher education systems at a pace never seen before, setting the stage for massive reforms. The argument in the present project is that such processes, where ideas tend to move over time and space, are best described by the concept of *translation*, indicating a dynamic approach to the process of travel, which fits the assumption of the present framework of ideas as structurally open and dynamic as they are coupled and re-coupled with other ideas (Carstensen 2010). The translation metaphor emphasizes strategic agency, but without reducing this to materially given interests or assumptions of rationality. It thereby attempts to escape a more static perspective, where terms such as *diffusion*, *transference* or *saturation* are common in descriptions of moving ideas (Mukhtarov 2012).

The use of the concept of translation in studies of how ideas move has mainly been furthered by Czarniawska and Joerges (1996) within the framework of what is known as *Scandinavian institutionalism* (Czarniawska and Sevón 1996; 2005; Brunsson and Olsen 1993; Czarniawska 2008; Sahlin and Wedlin 2008). Scandinavian institutionalism deals with policy ideas and institutions and can thus be seen to be part of the ideational turn described earlier. Scandinavian institutionalists, however, particularly focus on how ideas travel by way of translation, and are highly inspired by other theoretical developments, most notably Actor Network Theory (Callon and Latour 1981; Latour, 1986)<sup>7</sup>. The translation approach to the study of travelling ideas describes how 'ideas are translated into objects (models, books, transparencies), are sent to other places than those where they emerged, translated into new kind of objects, and then sometimes into actions' (Czarniawska 2009). Translation is in that way more than a linguistic term, as it describes how ideas *move*, *transform* and *materialize*, whether in text, language or objects. These materializations can in turn set the stage for future actions and translations, highlighting how the both the travelling idea and the context in which it emerges transforms (Czarniawska and Sevón 2005). Policy development is an example of a process of translation, wherein specific transla-

---

<sup>7</sup> Ideational institutionalism and Scandinavian institutionalism have, even for their very similar research aims and methods, developed as two distinct theoretical disciplines, with very little cooperation or cross-fertilization. This is most likely due to the fact that ideational institutionalists primarily stem from the fields of political science, political or comparative economy, international relations etc., while the Scandinavian School has its origin in the organizational research field.



tions of certain ideas materialize in policy documents, which are thought to serve as prescriptive tools, e.g. for universities, and thereby as foundations for their actions.

Scandinavian institutionalists often claim that the driver behind these processes is 'fashion', which 'guides imitation and attention of actors to specific ideas, model and practices, and fashion identifies what is appropriate and desirable at a given time and place' (Sahlin and Wedlin 2008). This view on translation dynamics is clearly rooted in sociological/organizational new institutionalism. The key innovation by Scandinavian institutionalists, however, is that they reject the assumption that organizations simply imitate scripts or models implemented by similar organizations through a logic of appropriateness, but claim that organizations actively translate such models into their local organizational context, thus creating a new organizational 'reality' (Czarniawska and Sevón 1996).

## 2.5 Where travelling ends...

As indicated above, ideational institutionalism has so far primarily been applied as a framework for analyzing politics, political behavior and policy processes (Béland and Cox 2011; Campbell 2002; Lieberman 2002; Carstensen 2010). Similarly the translation perspective has been applied mainly in broad organizational change studies, albeit with clear awareness of the micro-processes of the organizations in question (e.g. Czarniawska and Sevón 1996; 2005). These focus areas are of course consequences of the disciplinary foundations of the two perspectives. The result, however, is that even though both ideational institutionalists and translation scholars claim to be agency-centered (Béland and Cox 2011, 12; Czarniawska and Joerges 1996, 15), there seems to be a tendency to focus on macro processes, or on the transformation of organizations at the aggregated level, where individual narratives are seen as representations of an organizational narrative. This tends to leave the processes in which ideas transform organization members at the individual level under-examined or at least under-conceptualized (for an exception see e.g. Albæk 2009).

Ideational institutionalism thereby seems highly relevant in studies of *what ideas are and how they matter in policy processes*, and the translation perspective has great value in research focusing on *how ideas travel, and what makes them move*. The aim of the present research project, however, is also to investigate *what ideas do and how their translation is changed by and changes the perceptions, identities and behavior of individual actors* –

particularly individuals who are part of a highly institutionalized and value-laden environment, such as universities.

The argument is that the ideational and translation perspectives would benefit from a more explicit focus on the cognitive structures of individual and collective actors in order to answer such questions. The translation perspective explicitly aims at following how 'actors try to put together ideas and actions that come to them, in their never ending activity of sense making' (Czarniawska and Joerges 1996, 15). In order to gain a more in-depth perspective on these micro-processes of individual and collective translation, it therefore seems appropriate to turn to the organized sensemaking framework, which offers a more elaborate description of how such a sensemaking activity plays out.

## 2.6 ... Sensemaking starts

It appears that whenever enactment and sense making need a rich consideration of context, agency, structure, and mediated causality, institutional theory can help. [...]Whenever institutional theory needs a more in-depth consideration of cognitive complexity and the nature of logics, and whenever there seems to be a strong *Weltanschauung* or 'world view' guiding the behavior of members, enactment can help (Jennings and Greenwood 2003, 203).

As the quote indicates the coupling of institutional theory and the sensemaking framework is not a complete innovation, even if it is far from common. Several scholars have indicated the potential for cross-fertilization between the broader macro-perspective of new institutionalism and the in-depth micro-view of sensemaking (e.g. Schultz and Wehmeier 2010; Mills 2003; Jennings and Greenwood 2003). Mills (2003), quoting Weick (1995) has for instance highlighted how the sensemaking frame benefits from institutional theory and its explanation of how:

ideology and institutional systems become scripts that stabilize into meanings.[...] In other words, sensemaking in organizations is strongly influenced by cognitive frameworks in the form of institutional systems, routines and scripts (Mills 2003, 55).

The aim in the following sections is to introduce the sensemaking framework, with particular focus on the areas where it contributes to the ideational framework and the translation concept. Theories of identity are also introduced and discussed where relevant. In the last sections of this chapter, the

theoretical framework as a whole is described, and the relevance and implications of it for the individual studies are discussed.

### 2.6.1 What is sensemaking?

Sensemaking means exactly what it says: the making of sense. The term is sometimes accused of encompassing everything (and thereby nothing) and of being open to multiple interpretations and conceptualizations. Such an accusation may in some instances be justified, but the purpose of the following sections is to respond to this by delimiting the concept, selecting key elements and operationalizing them in order to construct a useful framework, which fits the present research project.

The increasing sense of complexity in modern society and the ensuing need for complexity *reduction* on both individual and collective level highlights the relevance of the concept of sensemaking. As mentioned in the previous sections, a vast number of ideas and impulses travel across national and organizational borders, scaffolding new problem definitions and policy solutions to nation states, private enterprises as well as individuals all over the world. The argument of the present research project is that higher education reforms, and the ideas that influence these reforms (cf. chapter 4) can be seen as drivers of sensemaking processes, as they introduce new ideas into an existing, highly institutionalized network of ideas, thus disrupting a situation which has already been assigned meaning.

The basic idea of sensemaking is that in situations where there are too many, contradicting or ambiguous inputs to process, the need for selection and segregation of a smaller number of inputs, which are processable to the individual or the organization, arises:

Explicit efforts at sensemaking tend to occur when the current state of the world is perceived to be different from the expected state of the world, or when there is no obvious way to engage the world (Weick et al 2005, 409).

Following this, sensemaking has often been applied as a framework for studying how people respond to crises, e.g. Weick's study of the Mann Gulch disaster (1993) or the Tenerife air disaster (1990).

Sensemaking is within the present framework understood as the process:

in which people concerned with identity in the social context of other actors engage ongoing circumstances from which they extract cues and make plausible sense retrospectively, while enacting more or less order into those ongoing circumstances (Weick et al. 2005, 409).

This definition holds 7 discrete characteristics of sensemaking, which will be briefly outlined in the following.

#### 2.6.1.1 Ongoing and plausible sensemaking

First, sensemaking is *ongoing*, which means that sensemaking processes are continual with no discernible beginning or end. Sensemaking is an uncompleted accomplishment, rather than an accomplished event; no end-result and thus no accurate starting point of investigation. The assumption is that people are immersed in flows (Weick 1995, 45) or 'in the middle of things' (Weick 1995, 43), and sensemaking is thereby an ongoing, if not always conscious activity.

... change, not stability, is the rule in any organization, and individuals continually live within streams of on-going events (Mills 2003, 42).

Sensemaking might be implicit and/or uncomplicated if this flow is relatively uninterrupted, i.e. if the impulses that comprises it are unambiguous. The challenge for students of sensemaking is that 'much of organizational life is routine and made up of situations that do not demand our full attention' (Weick et al 2005, 415), but this does not mean that sensemaking is not going on – it is simply more difficult to identify.

The second characteristic is that the primary goal of sensemaking is not accuracy, but *plausibility* as it is the most direct route to further action:

Because 'objects' have multiple meanings and significance, it is more crucial to get some interpretation to start with than to postpone action until 'the' interpretation surfaces (Weick 1995, 57)

Inherent in this is a dissociation with the rational choice- and realist perspectives of much organizational theory (e.g. Pfeffer and Salancik 1978), which posit a causal link between the accuracy of managers' decisions and effectiveness (Weick et al. 2005, 415). Sensemaking, however, emphasizes how individuals and organizations continually 'improve' their stories in order to absorb or refute criticism, incorporate more observed data or simply be a better fit with valued frames. This means that the (implicit) goal is not the 'right' interpretation, but merely better stories. As Weick puts it:

... in an equivocal, postmodern world, infused with the politics of interpretation and conflicting interests and inhabited by people with multiple shifting identities, an obsession with accuracy seems fruitless, and not of much practical help, either. Of much more help are the symbolic trappings of

sensemaking, trappings such as myths, metaphors, platitudes, fables, epics, and paradigms ... (Weick 1995, 61)

#### 2.6.1.2 Extracted and enacted cues

Thirdly, sensemaking is concerned with picking out cues from the continual 'flow of things'. Such extracted cues are 'simple, familiar structures' functioning as 'seeds from which people develop a larger sense of what may be occurring' (Weick 1995, 50). An extracted cue might be a number of different things, e.g. an element in a strategic plan, a phrase in legal framework, an event, a characteristic of a certain thing or person, or indeed anything from which a wider meaning can be extrapolated. A cue acts as a sort of headline, which binds together disparate elements. An example of an extracted cue from the present research project might be how department heads describe the democratic structures of the previous governance model of Danish universities. This cue, the democracy of the previous model, is taken as a seed from which meaning about the former legal framework in its entirety is constructed (see chapter 6).

... sensemaking is about the embellishment and elaboration of a single point of reference or extracted cue. Embellishment occurs when a cue is linked with a more general idea (Weick 1995, 57).

The 'incipient state of sensemaking' (Weick et al. 2005, 411) is the noticing or bracketing of salient cues; a process, which determines if events are deemed salient enough to actually make sense of or not. What we choose to pick out of the flow of things is guided to a wide extent by our past experiences, and the mental models that are shaped by past sensemaking processes.

The fourth characteristic of sensemaking is that it enacts 'more or less order into those ongoing circumstances' (Weick et al. 2005, 409). Enactment describes the 'making' in sensemaking (Weick 1995, 30) and highlights the dual focus on cognition and action. The assumption is that as people make sense, they enact their environment. In this way they create the very context that they are making sense of. People are not passive victims of circumstance, but active co-authors of the situations that they face, as they 'choose' to engage certain cues from a range of *potentially* salient cues. Sensemaking is thereby to a very high degree about creating categories out of a flux of information, ideas etc.; categories which then offer a sensible mirror within which people can reflect and recognize themselves. This process of enactment describes the way organizations and individuals organize events, ut-

terances or other stimuli, by creating (and enacting) new categories and categorizations that fit their existing mental models.

### 2.6.1.3 Retrospect and social

Following this focus on action (enactment) as well as cognition (extraction), the fifth characteristic is that sensemaking is a social process, which is performed in the imagined or actual presence of others. It is not only the scripts, ideas and mental models of the sensemakers that are taken into account, but also the imagined or experienced scripts, ideas and mental models of salient others, e.g. as they are represented by the symbols and language of the organization. Social identity scholars highlight the same dynamic, and contribute with knowledge on how salient group classifications are part of what is termed the 'social identity' (Ashforth and Mael 1989), and how the perceived image of the organization, i.e. how I think others perceive my organization, can be very influential on the perceptions and interpretations of issues within the organization (Dutton and Dukerich 1991; see also chapter 5 and section 2.6.1.5).

The interpretive and constructivist features of sensemaking are clear in the conceptualization of the sixth characteristic, namely that sensemaking is a retrospective process. Retrospection in this perspective means that an event (or any cue) is not 'discovered' to be meaningful *per se* – meaning is created by looking backwards in time and connecting it with other events. Starbuck and Milliken (1988) point out that:

People seem to see past events as much more rationally ordered than current or future events, because retrospective sensemaking erases many of the causal sequences that complicate and obscure the present and future.

In the present research project retrospect is important, when looking at how threats and opportunities are constructed both by department heads, top level managers and academic staff. These threats are not discovered in the present, but constructed in the present by looking back over past experience and previous sensemaking processes. This characteristic thereby resembles a key point in revisionist history, namely that 'members typically reinterpret the past in light of current insider beliefs and outsider perceptions, which has the effect of making identity appear stable to perceivers, even as it changes' (Gioia et al. 2000, 71). This highlights how identity is seen to be malleable; a critical notion in the present framework – and the seventh characteristic of sensemaking.

#### 2.6.1.4 Identity construction

The sensemaker is seen as 'an ongoing puzzle undergoing continual re-definition, coincident with presenting some self to others and trying to decide which self is appropriate' (Weick 1995, 20). Identity construction is by many seen as the most important element of sensemaking, as it 'influences how other aspects, or properties of the sensemaking process are understood' (Mills 2003, 55). This is also reflected in the focus of this dissertation, which has progressively come to deal more explicitly with matters of identity. As a consequence of this focus, the understanding of identity construction will be given more careful consideration than the previously described sensemaking characteristics.

#### 2.6.1.5 Personal, social and organizational identity

As stated above, identity and identity construction matters because it affects all other aspects of sensemaking processes. It is however not an unequivocal concept, but one that needs clarification and operationalization before it can be efficiently applied in an analysis. First and foremost, there are several 'layers' of identity which is relevant to the present study: personal, social, and organizational.

An individual's identity or sense of self is seen as a dual construction – consisting of a personal identity and a social identity:

the self-concept is comprised of a personal identity encompassing idiosyncratic characteristics (e.g., bodily attributes, abilities, psychological traits, interests) and a social identity encompassing salient group classifications (Ashforth and Mael 1989, 21).

The personal identity thereby refers to the set of assumptions about what characterizes me as an individual and sets me aside from other individuals. It is important to note that these attributes, abilities etc. are all socially constructed and contingent on the social identity, or more accurately on the sensemaking processes in which these classifications are constructed. Idiosyncratic thereby does not in this context mean 'given' or even 'stable', but simply 'distinct' or 'characteristic'.

The social identity is seen to be an amalgamation of the constructions of belonging to different groups, classes or organizations, as 'people tend to classify them-selves and others into various social categories, such as organizational membership, religious affiliation, gender, and age cohort' (Tajfel and Turner 1985, in Ashforth and Mael 1989, 20). Classifications are often based on what is seen to be prototypical traits of members, e.g. on the image of a

typical researcher or professor. Classifications are thereby about picking out cues that come to signify the broader group or class, i.e. a sensemaking process.

As the quote from Tajfel and Turner also indicates, a related concept is organizational identity. Organizational identity has to do with 'who we are' as an organization (Elsbach and Kramer 1996; Reger et al 1994; Weick 1995), and is most often defined as what is 'central, distinctive and enduring' about the organization (Albert and Whetten 1985). More closely fitting the interpretive approach of the present framework, this definition might be restated as: what people *perceive* to be central, enduring and distinctive about an organization<sup>8</sup>. Social identity and organizational identity thereby differs in terms of the 'object of identity': where organizational identity can be seen as the organization members' conceptions of what their organization is, social identity concerns their conceptions of who they themselves are, or more accurately which groups they see themselves as belonging to.

With this more complex and dynamic understanding of identity, we now return to the significance of identity construction in sensemaking processes. A basic assumption is that sensemaking processes tend to be focused on three basic 'identity-needs' (Coopery et al. 1997), namely the needs for self-enhancement, self-efficacy, and self-consistency (Erez and Earley 1993; Weick 1995; Brown et al. 2008; see chapter 7 for a more in-depth description of the three concepts). The three identity-needs function as a compass for the sensemaker, by offering a 'general orientation to situations that maintain esteem and consistency of one's self-conceptions' (Ring and Van de Ven 1989, quoted in Weick 1995).

The needs direct the attention towards cues that enhance feelings of self-esteem, consistency and efficacy, thus ignoring cues that may oppose such feelings. This is vital both in terms of personal as well as social (organizational) identity constructions; a positive perception of the organization's identity enhances a positive self-image, just as a negative perception might encourage identification with other social classifications (Elsbach and Kramer 1996).

---

<sup>8</sup> Whetten has in his later work embraced exactly this constructivist view on organizational identity, highlighting that identity equates an actor's subjective sense of uniqueness – and that organizational identity thus is an unobservable subjective state (Whetten 2006, 221).



### 2.6.2 Sensegiving

A final concept, which should be mentioned, is sensegiving. Sensegiving concerns the strategic, or willful, attempt to influence the sensemaking of others in a particular way. Put more plainly, it describes how managers give sense on to employees and stakeholders. It thereby resembles persuasion (e.g. Johnston 1994), or strategic communication (e.g. Lewis 2011) and is commonly used when studying managerial behavior in change processes (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991; Bartunek et al. 1999; Gioia and Thomas 1996). These studies have demonstrated that sensegiving may be intentional and directed at a specific audience, but also that is intricately linked with sense-making, which both precedes and follows sensegiving.

## 2.7 Institutional theory, translation of ideas and sensemaking

In the preceding sections, I have attempted to outline the theoretical sources of inspiration, i.e. ideational institutionalism, translation, and sensemaking, as well as the key concepts that are deemed relevant for the present study. The argument is that these three perspectives together comprise a valuable framework for analyzing how ideas influence and transform as they travel into and through organizations such as universities. In these concluding sections, I will elaborate further on how the three perspectives complement each other and how each one sheds light on the blind spots of the others.

There seems to be little controversy in adding a macro-perspective to the sensemaking framework. Weick himself has pointed out that the sensemaking perspective could benefit from closer couplings with institutional theory, as there is a common tendency among sensemaking scholars to put (too much) emphasis on agency and the active authoring of organizational members (Weick et al. 2005). He points to evidence that

organization members are socialized (indoctrinated) into sensemaking activities and that firm behavior is shaped by broad cognitive, normative and regulatory forces that derive from and are enforced by powerful actors such as mass media, governmental agencies, professions, and interest groups (Weick et al. 2005, 417).

This highlights the potential for a closer connection between institutional theory and sensemaking, in the conceptualization of how these institutional forces shape sensemaking.

The argument here is that studies of sensemaking processes in complex organizations can draw valuable insights from ideational institutionalism, and its descriptions and conceptualization of the influence of ideas as beliefs that propose and promote specific meanings. As described earlier, the definition of ideas entailed that: '[b]y giving definition to our values and preferences, ideas provide us with interpretive frameworks that make us see some facts as important and others as less so' (Béland and Cox 2011). The ideational perspective thereby provides a perspective on how macro-elements – ideas – may influence the sensemaking processes, as they shape the interpretive frames that we use when we extract cues and construct sensible stories.

Ideas can thereby be seen as both impulses to be made sense of and as part of the mental models we use to make sense. Ideational institutionalism offers such a perspective and framework for the studying the structural, macro-conditions that also influence sensemaking processes. The ideational framework describes how certain vocabularies are offered, triggered by the ideational streams; sensemaking seeks to explore what happens with the meaning that is offered. Sensemaking thereby also lends a helping hand to ideational institutionalism, in terms of providing a series of tools and concepts with which it is possible to observe and analyze the way organizations and their members 'receive' ideas, and thus what happens to them when they enter organizations.

The sensemaking framework thereby allows the individual and collective actors to emerge as more agentic and as co-authors of their own environments, as opposed to constrained by institutional (ideational) forces. Ideational institutionalism is thereby enriched with a perspective on how ideas impact people and behavior, not just political processes and policy formulation. This nuances the ideational explanation to why ideas produce different outcomes in different contexts.

Sensemaking and translation are closely connected concepts, but are nonetheless distinct as they offer different perspectives and different analytical lenses. As mentioned in the description of translation above, the concept has primarily been applied in analyses at the aggregate level, of organizations, organizational fields and the like. This means that the translation perspective has been focused on explaining how ideas travelled, and on providing an alternative view on this process than the traditional new institutionalisms. The goal of scholars of translation has in other words been to explain why and in what way organizations imitate each other. Sensemaking on the other hand seem to have been somewhat ignorant of the organizational context, or at least uninterested in explaining general tendencies in an

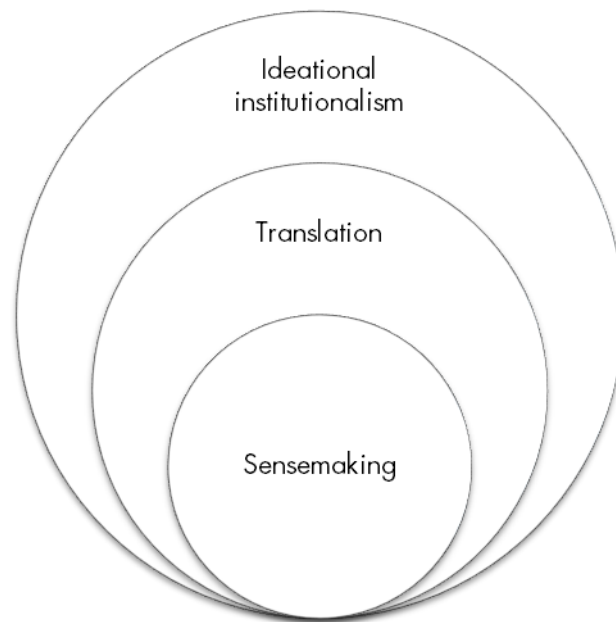
organizational field. Sensemaking is in this way by definition a micro-perspective, and studies have primarily dealt with single organizations or incidents. The two perspectives thereby complement each other as translation provides sensemaking with the conceptual link to the organization's context and with an eye for the dynamics of this context. Ideational institutionalism is seen as the meta-perspective, which provides an understanding of the ideational dynamics that comprise the flux of information that universities and academics are met with. Translation describes the process that plays out when ideas are picked out and noticed, and sensemaking provides concepts for exploring the impact of ideas at the intra-organizational and individual level.

In this way the three perspectives combine to form the overall analytical framework. Following the discussions above, the perspectives are not all explicitly applied in all the sub-studies, as they are each seen as particularly relevant for the study of a specific level. Ideational institutionalism and translation thereby comprise the specific analytical framework for the study of how ideas are translated into Danish university policy (chapter 4), but is less explicitly applied in the sub-studies that target the intra-organizational dynamics in sub-studies 2-5 (chapters 5-8). In these micro-studies the sensemaking framework offers more specific analytical tools for analyzing how translation plays out in the actions and interactions of organization members, and more explicit focus on the various factors that are influential on this level, e.g. the mental models, past experiences, identity constructions. The assumptions and perspectives of the general framework outlined in this chapter however inform the overall research strategy and thereby also the individual sub-studies. The more specific application of the framework in the sub-studies is described in the following section.

## 2.8 The framework and its application

Figure 2.1 below illustrates the relation between the three perspectives as it has been described and discussed in this chapter.

Figure 2.1: Theoretical framework



As mentioned, the theoretical framework is applied in various ways, emphasizing different theoretical aspects and elements. The framework as a whole functions as an analytical strategy – or meta-perspective – but not as comprehensive ‘road-map’ or a specific method. In the individual sub-studies different aspects of this overall framework are emphasized, as they target different research questions.

In the following section, I will attempt to outline how this has been done, and how the sub-studies as a whole illuminate the value of combining ideational institutionalism, translation and sensemaking. The theoretical contributions and findings will be discussed in more detail in the concluding chapter 9.

As Figure 2.1 indicates ideational institutionalism functions as an underlying framework in all five sub-studies. The importance of ideas is a vital assumption in the research project and has informed the development of the overall research question substantially. In chapter 4, however, ideational institutionalism also make up the explicit analytical framework, as the research aim here is to examine how ideas travel and are translated into policy. Particularly the notion of ideas at the level of problem definition and policy solutions functions as key analytical concepts. The translation concept is applied to describe how ideas move over time. The study contributes to the ongoing conceptual development of both ideational institutionalism and translation studies, by highlighting how ideas are translated in policy, and become transformational – not how translation plays out in organizations as has been the focus of Scandinavian institutionalists, or how ideas can be ‘measured’ in

policy development as ideational institutionalists often approach their studies.

The article demonstrates how these two perspectives complement each other and how they are both based on the assumption that problems and problem definitions are not objectively given – institutional inertia for instance is not a problem of a specific time or place, it is constructed as a problem within a specific translation process. In other words, we live and act in a stream of potential problems, but the act of drawing out specific issues and constructing them as ‘actual’ problems is one that is dependent on the specific composition of the context.

In chapter 5, the sensemaking framework is more explicitly applied to analyze the way top level managers handle the translation of new ideas. The theoretical focus of this particular study is on how top level managers cope with the need for both sensemaking and sensegiving – i.e. both the internally and externally oriented process. This study particularly elaborates on the social and sensegiving aspects of the perspective, contributing valuable knowledge on how important the perception of audience is in sensemaking and sensegiving. The article also highlights how ideas act as transformational forces in different ways, depending on the extent to which the idea ‘fits’ with existing mental models; a finding which emphasizes the strength and relevance of the theoretical framework.

In chapter 6, the theoretical framework acts as a catalyst for conceptual development, as it guides the analysis towards the formulation of a typology of department heads. First, the initial analysis points to two distinct sensemaking strategies, which then leads to the development of a department head typology. The sensemaking perspective is thus elaborated and reconceptualized in the interaction with the empirical data, laying the groundwork for the development of a new conceptual frame.

The study in chapter 7 discusses in more detail how ideas can be seen as catalysts of sensemaking, thus linking the two perspectives together. The typology is elaborated with more explicit focus on the identity constructions of department heads, and thus on a specific characteristic of sensemaking. Specific attention is paid to perceptions of the organization plays into the individual sensemaking processes; an aspect which has been somewhat under-researched in sensemaking studies in general. Theoretically, the article contributes with an elaboration of the relation between the perception of organizational identity and individual sensemaking; a perspective highly relevant both to the sensemaking framework, but also to organizational identity scholars.

The study in chapter 8 continues this thread, as it deals with both with collective sensemaking and how the organization, as a source of identification or a part of the social identity, emerges in the sensemaking processes of academic staff. Particular focus is on how the translations of ideas on other levels of the organization are perceived and made sense of on the 'production floor', thus linking the three perspectives together in a new context.

Together the development of the theoretical framework and the applications and elaborations of it in the individual studies point to a number of interesting avenues for further conceptualizations and theoretical development. The most interesting and promising of these will be discussed in more detail in the concluding discussion (see chapter 9), but for now I turn my attention to the methodological and operationalization issues that arise from and by way of the outlined framework.

# Chapter 3:

## The study of sensemaking and ideas - methodology and research design

In the previous chapters, the research aim and theoretical framework has been outlined and discussed. The questions and the framework hold a number of assumptions about knowledge, the construction of it and how to approach studies of the central concepts. The goal of the present chapter is to bring these assumptions to the fore and thereby create a basis for critical reflection on the results that emerge from the study.

### 3.1 The social construction of meaning

The focus of the study on ideas, translation and sensemaking in higher education indicates that meaning is not seen as a given and solid entity, which is out there for actors (or researchers) to uncover. Meaning and knowledge is seen to be constructed in a social space; an assumption which places the present study in the interpretivist paradigm.

This paradigm is, like the ideational perspective, rooted in a turn, namely the interpretive turn in the social sciences (Rabinow and Sullivan 1979), which describes an epistemological shift from positivism to interpretivism; from logical deduction and scientific objectivity to a focus on complex causality and the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann 1966). The present project follows this path, as it aims to explore the multiple ascriptions and constructions of meaning afforded in the social context, rather than approximating or uncovering 'the true meaning'.

We need to make a distinction between the claim that the world is out there and the claim that truth is out there (Rorty 1989, 4-5).

'Reality' and thus all knowledge of 'reality' is in the present framework seen to be a socially constructed phenomenon and this construction is contingent on the social situation within which it takes place; it is historically and culturally embedded (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Even if some radical social constructivists argue that this implies a refusal of the existence of the physical world, this is not the approach of the present framework. Physical and cognitive elements are however in and of themselves perceived to be devoid of

meaning (Esmark et al. 2005, 17), and are thus infused with meaning by way of social processes. Czarniawska has made the same point by claiming that:

[a] stone exists independently of our cognition; but we enact it by a cognitive bracketing, by concentrating our attention on it. Thus 'called to life,' or to attention, the stone must be socially constructed with the help of the concept of stone, its properties, and uses (Czarniawska-Joerges 1992, 36).

The stone – and the world – emerges as a consequence of our attention to it, and the socially constructed labels we use to describe it. With this starting point, social constructivists de-ontologize the object of study in order to question the presuppositions and to ask *how* a certain meaning comes to emerge and under which conditions, rather than asking *what* something means, and *what* the conditions and criteria are for knowing the truth about something (Andersen 2003). Social constructivism, as it interpreted within the present framework, is in other words about asking *how* instead of *what*, be inquisitive about *process* rather than *product*, and reflect critically on how the results of one's research is itself a construction.

Social constructivists thereby acknowledge that the researcher plays an active part in the production of knowledge and that the knowledge produced is thus also a construction. This naturally raises the question of relativism; of whether social constructivists can claim to produce knowledge, which is 'more valid' or better than other constructions? To address this concern, social constructivist researchers need to be reflexive on their own practice, and transparent in their process, to ensure that the premises of the knowledge are explicit. Judgments on quality and relevance are then at least informed, if not absolute. An example could be that the sensemaking processes studied in the present project are *constructed* as sensemaking processes by way of the chosen research design. The theoretical framework that I apply shape the way that my data emerges, so by looking for sensemaking processes – sensemaking processes are what I will find. This however does not render the findings invalid or hopelessly relativistic – merely contingent, which means that the findings are neither mandatory nor impossible (Luhmann 1984), i.e. they could have been different given a different research design, a different researcher etc.

This thereby fosters – or ought to foster – a heightened sense of responsibility and ethical reflection on the part of the researcher. As Hansen and Sehested put it:

If things could have been done differently, you need to be willing to show responsibility towards what you have actually done. So rather than leading to



an easiness and indifference – ‘relativism’ – constructivism actually leads to a higher degree of responsibility to the assessments and judgments, carrying the constructivist analyses (2003, 21 (my translation)).

The discussions and descriptions of the present chapter are my attempt of living up to this responsibility and laying forth the premises and assumptions of the research project, in order to make critical (self)reflection possible.

## 3.2 Analytical strategy and design

A central argument emerging from the social constructivist starting point is that empirical data and theory cannot be as sharply distinguished as within the (neo)positivist paradigm. Empirical data should never be seen as a representation of an objective reality, which can then be approximated by way of theory. The aim of theory is in this perspective to shape our view of the social world, and thereby our approach to data. Some scholars have claimed that such a view of science and knowledge production entails a shift from methods to analytical strategy, emphasizing the active choice of the researchers in the shaping of an analytical framework (Andersen 2003; Esmark et al. 2005). Research design is thereby not a matter of choosing the right methods, but to construct a theoretical set of lenses through which the social world comes to appear – an analytical strategy – while continually reflecting on the choices that are made. Within the specific study, this means that universities emerge as highly institutionalized organizations, the managers and academics as organization members with malleable identities, influenced by the myriad of ideas concerning higher education institutions and society. The empirical data of the present study, i.e. the policy documents and the narratives of the interviews and focus groups emerge as ‘translation and sensemaking narratives’. Another theoretical perspective would shape the object of inquiry differently, leading to a different research strategy and probably to different findings. In this way, the methodical and strategic choices made in this research process, can be seen as part of my own sensemaking process, influenced by my own socially constructed mental models (see chapter 2). From the vast array of possible theoretical perspectives available within the social sciences, I as a researcher have noticed, bracketed and thereby made salient a selected few – a process influenced both by my own history, education, research history etc.

Such a process creates a number of blind spots, most notably that the analysis can say nothing about the ‘world outside’ the translations and sensemaking narratives, e.g. about the power struggles that might influence

the policy development processes. Only the world as it emerges in the translations and sensemaking narratives become apparent and subject of analysis.

### 3.3 Case study research and quality assessment

The research project was designed as an in-depth case study, where the phenomenon of interest was the transformation of the Danish higher education management system. The advantage of case study research is that it emphasizes richness, accuracy and insight (Yin 1984), over nomothetic virtues like generalizability and theory testing. However, even though the inclination of the research project at hand was towards the ideographic and the in-depth understanding of a single case, I have attempted to remain open to the possibilities for development of more general conclusions. The goal of the study is thereby not purely ideographic, but could more accurately be described as conceptual; to produce knowledge and conceptual categories, which might inform future studies of similar cases. The goal is not to produce theory, but to build conceptual frameworks from thorough analysis, which may serve as heuristics for scholars, practitioners and policymakers alike.

This take on research is also naturally founded in the social constructivist underpinnings of the project, as I seek to 'describe a sequence of interrelated, contextually bound activities rather than a few well-isolated causal variables' (Gondo et al. 2010). Similarly, the theoretical framework described in chapter 2 emphasizes complex causality and the importance of both context and the micro processes of institutional change. The argument is that such issues are best investigated via in-depth case studies, which allows the researcher to study these processes in detail and in their context without having to simplify and de-contextualize, as is often the case with large-N studies etc.<sup>9</sup>. The cases are chosen to illuminate the impact and transformation of ideas on organizations and organization members – processes that are assumed to be affected by various organizational, social, personal and cultural

---

<sup>9</sup> Case study research has been criticized for focusing too narrowly on richness of data, thus sacrificing the broader eye for the prevalence and frequency of a particular phenomenon. Following this logic, case studies are often – at least by neopositivists – seen as addendums to more 'hard' quantitative studies, either as pre-studies (pilot studies) or post-studies. In the present project, however, the case study approach is seen as having intrinsic value and thereby as a stand-alone approach. Flyvbjerg points out that it is often more vital to find out which circumstances produce certain problems and with what consequences, than determining how often the problem arises (2006, 149), and to this end, case studies are important in and of themselves.

factors. In other words, when the goal is not to explain variation, but explore emergence and construction, the key becomes to ensure that the data is as varied as possible, in order to describe the context and the situations in which different scenarios play out.

### 3.3.1 Considerations of quality measures and assessment

The aim and approach of the study means that the pursuit of relevant and credible knowledge, and a transparent and non-arbitrary process, becomes more important than the quest for validity, reliability and generalizability, which is seen as the key quality measurement concepts in quantitative studies (Kvale 1995; Flyvbjerg 1991; Schrøder 1999). I thereby follow Flyvbjerg (1991; 2006) in his insistence that case studies should not attempt to measure themselves on the scales of quantitative studies, but specify their own criteria for quality.

The overall quality claim of the present study is that validity relies on the open and responsible description and discussion of the research design and premises of the study, as described in the present chapter (Schrøder 1999; Andersen 2003). A constant focus on transparency in the research process is seen to decrease the possibility of arbitrariness and relativism, as it forces the researcher to reflect upon the choices made in the process, and thereby also the reasons for making these choices. Transparency is in this way a way of driving second-order reflections (Andersen 2003), which aim to illuminate the blind spots that are produced with every decision in the research process. By ensuring that readers have been presented with the assumptions, considerations and choices that underlie the study, e.g. in terms of case selection, interview methods etc., at the very least the assessment of the value and quality of the research will be performed on an informed basis.

Similarly, a focus point in the research process has been to repeatedly link the data with the theoretical assumptions and claims, in order to strengthen the relevance and credibility of the knowledge produced. These relevance and credibility aims have guided the development of the research design, where the theoretical framework and its assumptions have guided the selections. In the analytical process, the theoretical assumptions were in the same way 'guide posts', and have been continually revisited and related to the sensemaking narratives. The claim is that to provide knowledge, which is relevant to both the scientific community and the non-academic world, one must aspire to consistently relate the interpretation of data to theoretical arguments, in order to address their relevance to the study of the phenomenon of interest.

## 3.4 Research strategy

Following the discussions above, the remaining part of this chapter seeks to illuminate and discuss the research design and the choices and selections made in the development of this design. Initially, I will present the strategic approach, inspired by phenomenography and thick description and how this perspective has informed the case selection and methods of data collection. Subsequently the empirical data is introduced and the data coding process is discussed.

### 3.4.1 The phenomenographic inspiration

The research strategy is inspired by phenomenography; a research strategy developed in the 1970s within educational studies, as a way of looking at how people experience and understand different phenomena (D'amour 2008; Marton and Booth 1997)<sup>10</sup>. The goal of phenomenographic studies is, similarly to the research aim of the present study, to describe the qualitatively different ways in which people experience and think about their world, and the ambition is to go from testing propositions to mapping differences. By looking at differing experiences – or sensemaking, in the vocabulary of the project – it is possible to look at which action patterns are given meaning, and deemed appropriate, e.g. which 'ways of being a university manager' are experienced as meaningful (see chapters 6 and 7). The point is therefore to include as many of the imaginable variations as possible, to provide the greatest amount of information about the phenomenon of interest. In this way phenomenography has similarities to Geertz and his thick description (Geertz 1973), but where Geertz aims at describing the context from the researcher's point of view, phenomenographers focus on the experience of individual respondents. In other words, the aim is to investigate how the world is experienced by the people in it in order to understand how they act as part of it.

The phenomenographic inspiration fosters a research strategy, which focuses on thick description of experiences and sensemaking. Or as Stake puts it:

---

<sup>10</sup> Phenomenography should not be confused with or seen as a research strategy of phenomenology (e.g. Husserl 1913), but as a distinct methodological approach, which focuses on empirical studies of human experience and a search for the perceptions of a phenomenon, as opposed to phenomenological search for the essence of a phenomenon (Marton and Booth 1997).

To know particulars fleetingly of course is to know next to nothing. What becomes useful understanding is a full and thorough knowledge of the particular, recognizing it also in new and foreign contexts (Stake 1978)

To this end, an overall case was selected and a number of sub-units within this case. This selection process will be elaborated in the following section.

### 3.4.2 Case selection

Denmark was chosen as the overall case as it represents a variant of a paradigmatic case (Flyvbjerg 2006; Gerring 2007; Pavlich 2010). Paradigmatic cases '(...) involves placing an exemplar alongside a phenomenon; by virtue of so placing, it shows or reveals key elements of that phenomenon' (Pavlich 2010). Hereby, paradigmatic cases highlight more general characteristics of the societies in question (Flyvbjerg 2006, 232), adding reflective and illustrative knowledge about the workings of the phenomenon of interest. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, the Danish institutional reforms in the higher education sector have gone quite far in comparison with other European countries, over the course of only a few decades (Aagaard 2011; Aagaard and Mejlgaard 2012). The political reforms of the Danish higher education system have clearly been influenced by the ideas about professionalization, strategic capacity and competitiveness, and Denmark can thereby be seen as a very clear example of a general European reform trend, where the possible impacts of these reforms would be more visible than in other countries.

This does not indicate that I contend that Denmark is a representative case of higher education systems under reform, nor that I claim to be able to mirror a more general trend. A paradigmatic case may however illustrate wider societal phenomena, just as the present study might serve to exemplify prototypical tendencies of sensemaking processes.

Within my overall unit of analysis (Danish higher education system) I have chosen to look more closely at two institutions, namely Aarhus University and Aalborg University. In order to explore how organizational factors may influence the translation and sensemaking of ideas about higher education, these two institutions were initially chosen for their institutional profiles; one being a relatively classic university and the other having a more entrepreneurial orientation. The theoretical assumption guiding this selection is that routines, scripts, and organizational image and identity may influence the translation and sensemaking of ideas. In order to explore the qualitatively different ways organizational members experience and make sense of this, it

is thereby important to study the varying organizational forms and contexts that the two universities represent.

The initial case selection strategy was however hampered by circumstance as Aarhus University, representing the classic research university, in the time after case selection went through a major organizational restructuring exercise, which has fundamentally changed both the administrative and disciplinary structure (see chapter 1). Such processes of 'modernization' can however be seen in almost all Danish university, albeit not to such a radical degree as is the case in Aarhus. This indicates that the initial case selection strategy may not have been viable in any circumstance; one would indeed be hard pressed to find a good representative of a 'classic' university in Denmark today. The selection of the two universities may therefore still be seen as good representatives of the general university landscape in Denmark, thus providing good research sites for investigating how ideas travel into and through higher education institutions.

The goal of variation, in order to explore differences in perceptions and sensemaking, is also reflected in the selection of sub-units, which were used to target different levels of management in the universities. 16 departments from 3 different disciplinary fields were chosen for investigation, with the aim of obtaining variation on such parameters as size (small and large departments), tradition (old research fields, e.g. physics, as well as newer, interdisciplinary research fields, e.g. molecular biology) and manager experience (long and short, in order to capture experience from the previous legal framework vs. only experience with the new framework).

The overall design thereby resemble what some have termed a 'case-within-a-case' study, where an overall case is divided into a number of meaningful subunits to allow for comparisons and potential theoretical generalization (Gondo et al. 2010). The goal is however not theoretical generalization as such; the selection strategy is chosen with reference to the phenomenographic goal in mind: to investigate the *qualitatively different experiences* of the ideas about higher education. In this respect the variation is important, as the focus shifts from the individual to the collective pool of meaning that the individual supplies to.

### 3.5 Empirical data collection

Several sources of empirical data have been included in the study, each highlighting different aspects of and angles on the research question in order to provide the reader with a thick description of the cases under scrutiny, as well as a thorough analysis of the research questions posed. In the following

sections, the different sources of data and the processes in which they were collected are described and discussed, offering an elaboration on the selection criteria mentioned above.

### 3.5.1 Interviews

Interviews are one of the most preferred and valued types of data collection in interpretive studies. The advantage of individual, in-depth interviews is primarily the opportunity to gain a closer look into the respondent's ongoing process of organizing and sorting possible meanings and frames. As Marton and Booth puts it:

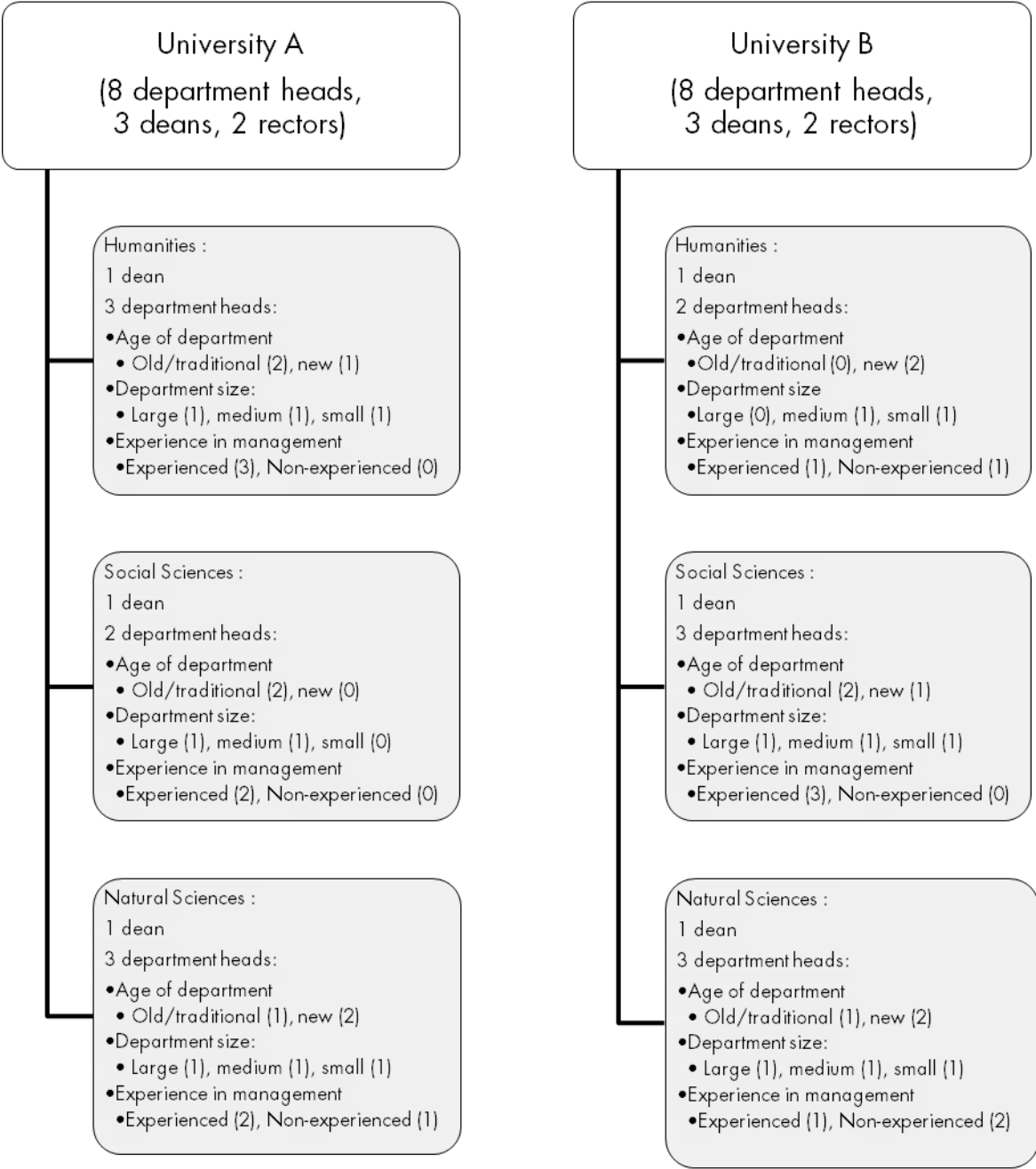
in order to make sense of how people handle problems, situations, the world, we have to understand the way in which they experience the problems, the situations, the world, that they are handling or in relation to which they are acting (Marton and Booth 1997).

The criteria, which informed the selection of informants, namely institutional affiliation, experience in terms of management, and disciplinary affiliation, were seen as potentially important sources of frames for sensemaking, based on the assumptions of theoretical framework and on previous studies (Deem 2004; Henkel 2000; 2005; Meek et al. 2010). Experience as university manager (and thereby also experience in academia) was for instance thought to potentially play a part in sensemaking processes, as it might strengthen the salience and impact of the academic values and logics (see e.g. Deem (2004) and Henkel (2000) for studies of the salience of academic values and norms).

16 respondents were chosen at department head level, 6 at faculty level (deans) and 4 at rector-level. Since the total number of rectors in office is evidently quite small, this sample also includes former rectors. The distribution of informants is outlined in figure 3.1 below.

The interviews were designed as semi-structured, in order to foster conversation and reflection, rather than the passing of information; a goal which entailed open questions and a focus on allowing the respondents to digress. The interviews all lasted between 45 and 120 minutes, a diversity stemming from the semi-structured nature of the interview guide (see appendix 1). Semi-structured interviews are seen as a useful approach to gaining insight into sensemaking processes of informants, even if they may also be seen to direct or even force out sensemaking that would have otherwise taken a different course.

Figure 3.1: Informants for qualitative interviews and their distribution on organizational unit



It is important to emphasize that an interview can be viewed as a sensemaking process in itself, and that the interviewer can, consciously or not, be perceived as an audience or a representative of an audience. The interviewer is therefore a co-creator of the sense that is made, also by way of the enactment that the questions asked represents. In the interview situation, however, the informants were given ample possibilities and room to digress, pursue trains of thought that they deemed important, and follow their own narrative order. Cf. the discussion of quality assessment in interpretive and social con-



structivist studies above, I however acknowledge this circumstance and have sought to enhance the transparency of the process, by laying forth the interview guide and the premises behind (see appendix 1).

### 3.5.2 Documents

The document data used in the research project, mainly the sub-study which is reported in article 1, consisted of all the formal documentation surrounding the changes in the legal framework concerning higher education governance since the late 1960s, i.e. the bills that were proposed, any white papers, the comments that accompany any change in the legal framework, as well as the actual legal text. These documents are taken as the materialization of the official translation of ideas at a given point in time.

It is important to keep in mind that these documents cannot say much, if anything, about the context in which they were constructed. They are in other words sources of knowledge about only themselves, and should not be perceived as expressions of anything else. To supplement these textual sources, other sources of documentary material are included, e.g. existing studies of Danish higher education policy and studies of simultaneous developments in other sectors, countries and organizations. The documentary material primarily informs the ideational analysis in chapter 4, where focus is on exploring how ideas travel over time in the form of policy translations.

### 3.5.3 Focus group interviews

The sub-study reported in chapter 8 is based on data from three focus group interviews with academic staff from the two case universities. Each focus group comprised academics from one of the case-departments, one from natural science, one from humanities and one from social science. The strategy behind conducting focus group interviews with participants from the same department is to be able to gain insight into the specific logics, norms and values that characterize the interaction in the particular department<sup>11</sup>.

The selection of participants attempted to ensure variation on parameters such as seniority, i.e. including both postdocs, assistant professors, associate professors and full professors, thus following the phenomenographic se-

---

<sup>11</sup> Choosing to include participants from different departments and disciplines in the same focus group might have contributed with knowledge about the more abstract and generalized logics that characterizes 'academia' or the university in general. This was not possible within the scope of the present study, but would surely be an interesting strategy to pursue in future studies.

lection strategy outlined above. Based on assumptions of socialization, the sensemaking processes of junior staff were expected to be different from those of senior staff, and differences across disciplines were also expected, since the professional cultures, departmental traditions etc. vary across these borders.

The interviews were structured around questions about motivation for going into - and staying in - the career as an academic, about the perceived conditions of academic work, the perception of the new management and governance structures etc. and the questions are posed as relatively open questions, with the aim of encouraging discussion in the group rather than 'simple' dialogue with the interviewer (see interview guide in appendix 1). As a means to this end a large part of the focus group sessions were centered on two exercises, which functioned as an introduction to a discussion, where the participants engaged in a collective sensemaking process.

#### 3.5.4 Coding strategies

After collection, the interview data went through a multi-step process, where the first step was to transcribe all the interviews verbatim. The transcripts were thereafter subjected to a number of readings in order to become re-familiarized with the material.

The next step in the process was a *first order, inductive coding* of the data, based on the thematic content of the interview sessions, i.e. what did they talk about. The content was naturally affected by the questions in the interview guide, but the aim of the first order coding was to go beyond these questions and identify broader themes that emerged from the interviews (O'Reilly et al. 2013; Boyatzis 1998). This first-order coding is similar to what Glaser and Strauss termed open coding, as it is a fairly descriptive categorization of the data (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Price 2010). In the department head study for example, the first-order coding resulted in 38 broad themes that were somewhat consistent across the interviews, e.g. experiences of the management role, relations to staff (academic and administrative), funding and economy, conflict etc. (see appendix 2 for example of coding process). These broad themes were then reviewed and related to the theoretical framework and the research questions in order to refine the categories in a *second order coding* process (O'Reilly et al. 2013; Boyatzis 1998). For the department head study, for instance, particular emphasis was put on the experiences with and attitudes towards e.g. appointed vs. elected managers, time for research, time for teaching, important tasks and characteristics of a university manager, manager type/metaphor, perception of management,

own role as a manager. In this process selected key words or quotes were attached to each theme. From this, three 'types' of department heads emerged. The development of the typology thereby emerges from the empirical data but was theoretically qualified and represents what may be called the third-order coding, which organizes the categories from the second order coding into themes, which allows the researcher to identify patterns in the data (O'Reilly et al. 2013).

### 3.6 Methodic pitfalls and challenges

As outlined in the sections above, the main part of the data of the present project has been produced by direct interaction with individuals. This has naturally entailed a number of challenges, which will be brought forth in this concluding section.

The first potential challenge concerns the role of the researcher in the data collection process. This is an issue which is always important to reflect upon in interpretive and social constructivist studies, but one that is particularly important when studying 'your own backyard', as is the case in the present study where the author is employed in one of the case universities – and indeed a part of the university system and academia as such. Alvesson (2003) has highlighted strengths, e.g. closeness with and access to data and rich empirical accounts, and weaknesses, e.g. the problem of reproducing tacit assumptions, blind spots etc., of studying one's own organization. These potential weaknesses are indeed seen as influential and actual challenges in the present research project. A particular challenge in the present project lies in the fact that the informants are peers – both formally as an employee and informally as being a part of the higher education system and academia in general. This may produce problems of 'implicitness' in particular constructions, leading to the non-verbalization of particular values that are believed or perceived to be implicit. I have attempted to confront this challenge by continually asking the respondents to qualify and elaborate on their answers, e.g. asking questions such as: 'can you say more about what this process/reform/other event has meant to you as a manager?', or 'you said, 'old professors', what do you actually think characterizes this group?'

Another particular challenge arising from the 'closeness' relates to the hierarchy within the organization and thereby the power/political structures that might influence the interview situation. The respondents are naturally well-renowned academics, and in most cases part of a positional hierarchy, of which the researcher is also part. In practice, I do not believe that this has produced lasting effects in the interviews, but remain aware that respond-

ents of any type may have perceived agendas or motives that might 'skew' the interview situation.

A final challenge is that one of the aims of the study has been to examine how the transition from 'traditional academic' to manager is handled, which for some may be - and indeed is - a sensitive subject. This sensitivity may stem from the strong academic tradition of self-governance and collegial management, and the ensuing distaste for 'hard management' (see chapters 6-8). This may lead to a desire to project a certain image of oneself in a research interview situation. Given the research aim and philosophical position of the research, this is not seen as a problem or disadvantage to the research project *per se*, because the aim is also to explore how social norms and criteria of legitimacy are perceived and constructed, but naturally it is an issue which should be kept in mind. I am not however (academically) interested in their 'true feelings', but have attempted to remain focused on their constructions and enactments of their environments. A strategy towards this has been to ask them to reflect on both more abstract and generalized characteristics of 'ideal' managers and on what they perceive to be their most important tasks, and attempt to get them to verbalize the expectations they feel they are met with.

In the previous chapters, I have outlined the aims, focus, framework and design of the overall research project. The purpose of this has been to lay forth the premises on which I have built my research, to inform the assessments of the results as much as possible. It however seems high time to delve into the 'substance' of the research project, which will be the aim of the following five chapters. Here the sub-studies are presented, in the form of five articles. Subsequently the findings and their overall contributions are discussed in chapter 9.

Chapter 4:  
Translating Governance Ideas in  
Danish Higher Education

Article published in *Higher Education Policy*



# Translating Governance Ideas in Danish Higher Education

Lise Degn

The Danish Centre for Studies in Research and Research Policy, School of Business and Social Sciences, Aarhus University, Bartholins Allé 7, Aarhus C, 8000, Denmark.

E-mail: ld@cfa.au.dk

Many of the same ideas seem to crop up repeatedly in the higher education governance reform wave in recent decades, with accountability, flexibility, and strategic capacity being a few of the common concepts. Several studies have shown, however, that national higher education systems receive these inputs very differently, leading to dissimilar implementation and interpretations of the same ideas, indicating that national contexts deserve particular attention when investigating the influence and impact of new concepts. The present paper presents results from a study of how central ideas about management and governance of higher education institutions have shaped and reshaped Danish national higher education policy since the 1970s. This study demonstrates the dynamics of how powerful ideas ‘travel’ over time, and adds to our knowledge about how ‘global’ ideas become ‘local’.

*Higher Education Policy* advance online publication, 27 May 2014;

doi:10.1057/hep.2014.12

**Keywords:** higher education; higher education governance; Danish politics; policy ideas

---

## Introduction

Many of the same ideas seem to crop up repeatedly in the higher education governance reform wave in recent decades, with accountability, flexibility, and strategic capacity being a few of the common concepts (de Boer and File, 2009). These ideas, many of which are linked to the highly influential concept of ‘the knowledge economy’, often connect the higher education system and its output to the success and survival of national economies by way of the responsibility of the system to provide society with skilled labour and readily accessible (and applicable) knowledge and technology, while at the same time being cost-efficient and competitive (e.g., Bleiklie, 1998; Gornitzka and Maassen, 2000; Amaral *et al.*, 2002; Corbett, 2003; European Commission, 2005; OECD, 2009). Several studies have shown, however, that national higher education systems respond to these inputs very differently, leading to the same ideas being implemented and interpreted differently (Bleiklie and Kogan, 2007; de Boer and File, 2009; Paradeise *et al.*, 2009; Christensen, 2011; Piironen, 2013). This indicates that national contexts



deserve particular attention when investigating the influence and impact of new concepts.

Development in the Nordic countries offers a good case in point of differing policy interpretation of powerful ideas. As Fägerlind and Strömqvist (2004) have illustrated, reforms have been the order of the day in Nordic higher education systems in recent decades, which has put the Nordic higher education model under pressure (Fägerlind and Strömqvist, 2004, 45). Denmark represents an interesting case here, as the national policy developments in this area in recent decades is considered quite exceptional in terms of converting international ideas into policy (Pinheiro and Stensaker, 2013). Reform initiatives aimed at transforming funding schemes, sectorial dynamics, and institutions themselves were implemented in Denmark well before similar reforms were seen in other Scandinavian countries. Particularly, the large-scale reform of the university system in 2003 and subsequent amendments can be seen as breaking with many traditions, severing the traditional ties between the institutions and state by granting them the status of self-owning institutions. The change in status was accompanied by significant changes in the governance and management structures, later followed by a large-scale merger process, which transformed the Danish higher education landscape (Hansen, 2012). This reform process was experienced as a break with the long tradition of an arm's length relationship between higher education institutions (HEIs) and the state, which had previously characterized the Nordic higher education systems (Gornitzka *et al.*, 2004).

All levels of higher education policy and governance are influenced by powerful ideas, which often seem to collide or contradict. The argument of the present paper is that such ideas are key concepts, which should be taken seriously as we attempt to understand how higher education policies develop and set the stage for institutions that are charged with implementing policies. This paper deals with how central ideas about management and governance of HEIs have shaped and reshaped Danish national higher education policy since the 1970s. The processes in which such ideas are translated into policy enact a set of problem definitions and appropriate solutions, constructing a set of circumstances for the higher education system and its institutions that cannot be ignored. Examining how these ideas have been translated will hopefully contribute to an increased understanding of the dynamics determining how powerful ideas travel over time — adding to our knowledge about how 'global' ideas become 'local' (Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005).

## **Theoretical Framework**

In recent decades, increasing interest in the role of ideas has characterized the conceptual developments in neo-institutional theory, some even referring to an '*ideational turn*' in neo-institutional theory (Blyth, 1997). The ideational approach has gradually become more accepted and gone from being conceptual developments



to a more distinct branch of neo-institutionalism (Schmidt, 2008), coined ‘constructivist institutionalism’ (Rhodes *et al.*, 2008), ‘discursive institutionalism’ (Schmidt, 2008), and ‘ideational institutionalism’ (Hay, 2001). Ideational institutionalism is preferred in this paper, as it emphasizes what makes this perspective unique, namely the focus on ideas as significant sources of influence in political processes.

Béland and Cox (2011) highlight the importance of ideas by stating that

... ideas shape how we understand political problems, give definition to our goals and strategies, and are the currency we use to communicate about politics. By giving definition to our values and preferences, ideas provide us with interpretive frameworks that make us see some facts as important and others as less so. (Béland and Cox, 2011, 3)

Ideas are seen as normative and causal beliefs, working within a dynamic network of other ideas, establishing the goals and means by which these goals can legitimately be obtained (see, e.g., Hall, 1993; Campbell, 2002; Braun, 2006; Menahem, 2008). In a higher education perspective, ideas can be seen as beliefs about the role and purpose of science, of universities, and of knowledge and the conditions under which these purposes are best fulfilled.

Ideational scholars tend to distinguish between ideas on three levels of generality: policy solutions, problem definitions, and public philosophies (or *zeitgeist*) (Schmidt, 2008; Mehta, 2011). *Policy solutions* describe ideas operating on the level of specific policy areas; ideas that indicate specific solutions to a specific political problem/issue, such as a system of appointed leaders as opposed to elected ones. *Problem definitions* or *programmes* describe how ideas work at the level that underpins policy; ideas can be identified as the beliefs that provide the legitimacy of the policy solutions, for example, understanding institutional inertia as a product of rigid and unprofessional, collegiate management structures. Finally, ideas can operate on the level of *philosophy*; the deep core beliefs underlying both policy and programme, such as understanding the higher education system as an instrument in the service of the national system as opposed to a more institutional perception of the higher education system with an independent *raison d’être* (Olsen, 2005). The tripartition of ideas does not imply a ‘trickle-down’ movement; that is, that ideas ‘begin’ at the level of philosophy and diffuse down into policy and programmes, but rather that there is an interaction between levels that goes both ways. Policy solutions may well influence both programmes and more broad public philosophies — and *vice versa* (Mehta, 2011).

A vital assumption in ideational institutionalism is that ideas function as a filter through which we see ourselves, and thereby also our preferences, goals, and spaces for action. Goals, strategies, values, and preferences are thus not given, but negotiable and flexible constructs that are continuously narrated and articulated by actors, who, in turn, act strategically on the basis of these perceived interests (Sahlin and Wedlin, 2008, 222). The emergence of a new idea triggers new perceptions and spaces of meaning, which in turn leads to possible reformulations of interests and





goals (Rhodes *et al.*, 2008). Ideas thereby construct some form of path dependence, which influences the possible trajectory of any new idea that is inserted or emerges within this network.<sup>1</sup>

As mentioned in the introduction, ideas seem to move over space and time; the same ideas tend to emerge in higher education policies across Europe, resulting in major reforms of national systems. To analyse the process by which ideas spread and travel over space and time, Czarniawska and Sevón — inspired by, among others, Callon and Latour (1981; Latour, 1986) — have suggested viewing this as a translation process; a process that transforms both the idea and context (Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005). Ideas are seen as relational and dynamic; they derive meaning from other ideas and ‘there exists a dynamic relationship between new and old ideas: the process of coupling the two changes both ideas, because the original idea is viewed in a new light, and the new idea is changed to fit with the old idea’ (Carstensen, 2010, 850). The concept of translation is used to highlight the dynamic travel and transformation of ideas, and escape a more static perspective, where terms such as *diffusion*, *transference*, or *saturation* are common (see Mukhtarov (2012) for an overview).

In other words, the translation approach to the study of travelling ideas describes how ‘ideas are translated into objects (models, books, transparencies), are sent to other places than those where they emerged, translated into new kind of objects, and then sometimes into actions’ (Czarniawska, 2009). Translation is thereby more than a linguistic term, as it describes how ideas *move*, *transform*, and *materialize* — be it in text, language, or objects, and how these materializations in turn set the stage for future actions and translations. Policy development is seen as a process of translation, whereby specific translations of certain ideas materialize in policy documents, which are thought to serve as prescriptive tools for HEIs — and thereby as foundations for their actions.

## Analytical Design

For the present study, each of the significant legal changes concerning higher education governance since the initial formulation of Danish policy for research in 1970 have been collected and analysed, including the bill, selected white papers, the comments, and actual legal text for each act of legislation concerning higher education since the late 1960s. The legal documents were replenished with existing studies of Danish higher education policy and studies of related developments in other contexts.

Each section initially introduces the main changes to the legal framework, which are subsequently analysed by way of *two dimensions*, which together provide a comprehensive view on the central ideas influencing this stage of policy development.

The first dimension relates to the *problem definition* level of ideas, as described above. To illuminate the ideas working at this level, I consider how the *role and*



*purpose of the higher education system* is constructed: what is the overall goal of the higher education system that emerges in the policy narratives? How is the relationship to society, industry, and so forth perceived? And how does this definition attempt to determine areas for intervention or policy making? To investigate ideas working at this level, articulations and statements that problematize and define higher education are investigated; that which policy makers define as ‘the problem’ of HEIs. This speaks to how HEIs become politicized and contestable — and legitimate objects of policy.

Second, I look at the more narrow conception of ideas, namely the *policy solution* level. Here, the focus is on how the translation process specifies and prescribes specific solutions to the defined problems or which instruments are deemed appropriate. As we deal with the governance and management of HEIs, this means examining *the instruments* and *governance and management tools* that are seen as legitimate answers to the defined problems.

Cf. the theoretical framework described above, ideas are thought to operate on a third level of generality, namely public philosophy or *zeitgeist* (Schmidt, 2008; Mehta, 2011). Ideas working on this level are notoriously difficult to identify and study, as public philosophies both tend to cut across policy fields and ‘generally sit in the background as underlying assumptions that are rarely contested’ (Campbell, 2004). Analysing ideas on this level would entail a macro-perspective on the Danish policy developments that is beyond the scope of the present study. Public philosophy/*zeitgeist* ideas are therefore not explicitly analysed in the present article, but merely pointed out when apparent.

## **The Development of Danish Higher Education Policy in an Ideational Perspective**

### **1970 and 1973**

In 1970, the Administration Act (Folketinget, 1970) and subsequent amendment (Folketinget, 1973) formally defined and materialized Danish higher education policy for the first time. The Administration Act was constructed in response to primarily external problems, including demographic changes (more students and non-tenured staff), but another major national driver was the student revolt of 1968 against the professorial rule that had characterized the higher education system until that point (Hansen, 1971; Degn and Sørensen, 2012). The main feature of the Administration Act of 1970 was the implementation of a highly decentralized organizational structure; authority was delegated to the collegial bodies, where both students and academic staff from all levels were represented. In 1973, the technical/administrative personnel also received a place in these powerful bodies.



### *Purpose and problem definition*

The role and purpose of higher education that is constructed in this translation comes very close to the traditional values and norms influenced by what one might call the traditional ‘Humboldtian’ idea (Aagaard, 2011). The Humboldtian idea promotes higher education as a ‘*Republic of Science*’ (Polanyi, 1962) and the overall goal of scientific growth, more knowledge for the sake of knowledge. The means towards this end was freedom, both at the institutional and individual levels (Petersen, 1997). In the Danish policy translation of the 1970s, the free and independent generation of knowledge in HEIs was still seen as the key purpose of HEIs, and the premise of the reform was stated to be that: ‘the professional independence of the universities and HEIs is sustained’, particularly the right to design and organize teaching, to be free of external interference and pressure on research, and to recruit and elect both faculty and management (Folketinget, 1970, 2088). This idea clearly rested on an institutional view of higher education as a public good and knowledge as having intrinsic value (Olsen, 2005).

A key element in the policy translation is that it re-articulates the relationship with other actors in the field — in fact, the 1970 translation can be seen as a vital step towards *establishing* a policy field and opening it up to legitimate actors other than the universities. By way of formulating and enacting a policy for the field, the political system creates itself as a legitimate player; and even though this did not significantly transform the general status of HEIs, an idea which could be termed *governability* clearly influenced the translation. Kooiman has defined governability as ‘the overall capacity for governance of any societal entity or system’ (2008, 173), a definition that seems to fit the constructions in the 1970 translation of Danish higher education as a ‘system-to-be-governed’ (Kooiman, 2008). The Administration Act of 1970 described standardized organizational structures as a way to enhance openness towards the political system; that is, heightening the governability of HEIs (Folketinget, 1970, 2087). HEIs thereby emerge as *objects of government*, which represents a radically new way of articulating the HEI–government relationship.

This idea of governability was also powerful in other sectors, such as public administration, where a push towards establishing systems-to-be-governed and heightening governability through sectorial integration and central planning also became evident in this period (Andersen and Thygesen, 2004; Ejersbo and Greve, 2005), which naturally lends legitimacy and strength to the idea — and might even elevate it to the level of public philosophy as an idea about how to understand the purpose of government and the governed (Mehta, 2011). Within the field of higher education, however, the idea of governability clearly emerges in a context of other ideas, which influences the translation and affords a different trajectory than in public administration. The dynamic relationship between ideas particularly influences how the borders around the field of higher education are constructed in this translation. While the borders towards state and government are slowly eroded by



attempts to open up HEIs — making them governable — significant emphasis is placed on reinforcing the borders towards the industrial sector in particular:

one must [...] be reluctant towards granting these interests [the consumers of university-educated labour] a seat in the university agencies and encroach on the time-honoured freedom of the universities in this area.<sup>2</sup> (Folketinget, 1970, 2110)

This translation adheres to the Humboldtian ideas, such as self-governance and academic freedom.

### *Policy solutions*

One very influential and comprehensive policy solution was a massive democratization of the internal management structures in Danish HEIs, granting students, junior and senior academic staff, as well as technical and administrative staff seats in the collegiate bodies in order to ‘ensure larger groups the right to co-determination and co-responsibility’. The uprooting of the traditional internal management structures was very radical compared to similar reforms in other countries, but democratization was linked in the policy translation with Humboldtian ideas, offering a causal connection between the distribution of managerial and administrative duties and freeing up the professors to do more ‘actual’ scientific work:

The Government finds it desirable that this integration of different groups takes place, partly so that all teachers are given the opportunity to take part in the management of the university and partly because it makes it possible to distribute the managerial and administrative tasks to a wider circle of people, allowing the professors to focus more on research and teaching. (Folketinget, 1970, 2100)

Management and administration should be separated to enhance the time spent on research by the scientific personnel, which resonated well with the Humboldtian goal of freedom for the individual academic. The means, however, were new: determining formal procedures for participation and division of responsibility would secure freedom (Folketinget, 1970, 1973). Individual academic autonomy was thereby translated as a matter of structural transparency and division of labour, rather than purely as freedom from external infringement.

### **1985 and 1989**

In 1985, a committee was established to prepare for a major revision of the Administration Act of 1970. The committee’s white paper did not result in an actual revision of the law, but is included in this analysis, as it clearly represents the translation and ideas that dominated the view on higher education governance and management at the time. In 1989, a short amendment, allowed HEIs to experiment with new and more efficient internal management structures.



### *Purpose and problem definition*

In the mandate to the committee in 1985, the role of the higher education system is constructed as being knowledge producers, their purpose being to provide society and not least industry with the knowledge required to produce wealth. It was stated that the future:

must be expected to make increasing demands on the ability of the higher education institutions to readjust and for the optimal exploitation of allocated resources. Among the reasons for this are the changes in the size of birth cohorts and the educational choices of young people. Add to this the changing demands on education posed by the society of the future, as well as the needs of the private and public sectors for innovation and quality in the production. This development enhances the significance of the research and teaching of the institutions to the surrounding society. (Wandel, 1985, 2)

HEIs needed to assume the role of efficient, cost-effective cooperative partners of both the government and industry (Wandel, 1985, 60) — a significant change from the more autonomous knowledge-generating role of the 1970s. The purpose of higher education and knowledge production was translated as a matter of utility; of making the output useful to external stakeholders. The problem definition was highly influenced by notions of efficiency, both in terms of economic efficiency (value-for-money) and knowledge production.

These efficiency considerations are linked to notions of governability from the previous decade, forming a new problem definition. In this translation, democratization is defined as the problem rather than the solution, and the institutional and cultural shortcomings of HEIs — inertia and institutional rigidity brought on by the democratization of the institutions (Wandel, 1985, 60; Folketinget, 1988) — are highlighted as barriers to efficiency.

Among the shortcomings of the Act [of 1970], one must particularly highlight the fact that it is built on a principle of group representation, which has never been substantiated rationally by the core purposes of the institutions, which is research and education. Additionally, the notions of ‘participatory democracy’ that were so widespread in 1968 are now often perceived as a hindrance to effective management and a clear division of responsibilities. (Wandel, 1985, 60)

This problem definition describes HEIs as cooperation partners, not only of the political/administrative system but also of the industrial sector (Wandel, 1985, 60).

If the institutions are to be able to act as strong, dynamic, and credible partners in dialogue with public authorities, private enterprises, and organizations, the daily management must be made more efficient and the administration needs simplification. (Wandel, 1985, 60)



The problematization of the democracy idea is echoed in the translation from 1989, where HEIs were encouraged to experiment with new and more *efficient* management structures — emphasizing that initiative and determination on the side of the institutions was key and that powerful international actors, including the OECD and their evaluators, deemed the existing structured inadequate and faulty (Folketinget, 1988). This attempt to link the problem definition to powerful actors and international ideational streams can be seen as a way of strengthening the local translation.

### *Policy solutions*

The efficiency idea was also quite influential on the policy solution level, particularly as strong and functional internal management is highlighted as an essential tool:

[s]ociety's growing demands with respect to research and higher education have actualised the need for a more functional and focused management of the higher education institutions. (Wandel, 1985, 2)

While one of the goals was still constructed as freeing up time for 'real' academic work, the policy solutions increasingly targeted the *conditions* under which this production would be most efficient. The instruments were a simplification of the administrative system and more efficient day-to-day management, that is, clarification of authority and responsibility on the various levels of management and smaller, more authoritative collegiate agencies (Wandel, 1985, 60). The translation of efficiency here — and the coupling of efficiency and stronger management — can be seen as a burgeoning emergence of the stream of New Public Management (NPM) ideas, which influenced many of the policy translations concerning the public sector in the 1980s — both in Denmark and internationally (Hood, 1995; Christensen and Lægheid, 2001; Ejersbo and Greve, 2005; Aagaard, 2011).

The 1989 translation presents the notion of 'free universities'. HEIs were allowed to apply for permission to deviate from the restrictions of the existing legal framework and experiment with new governance and management structures. This translation describes a more neo-liberal perception of governance and management, as the goal is now to free the institutions from governance. This sharply distinguishes it from the idea of governability prevailing in the 1970s, where the solution was making the institutions subject to (political) governance. Now, the solution is to make the institutions (self)governing, and emphasis is on the institutional autonomy; that is, that the initiative and design of new governance and management structures lay with HEIs themselves — another typical NPM notion (Christensen and Lægheid, 2001).

### **1993 and 1999**

The 1990s saw two significant legal changes in higher education governance and management. In 1993, a bill was passed which pointedly emphasized the need for



stronger management as a way of holding HEIs accountable for production (educational as well as research-wise) and in order to allow for increasing academic and economic self-governance (within HEIs). The law strengthened the position of the top management (rectors and deans) and the competencies of the department heads (Folketinget, 1993). An amendment followed in 1999, aimed at ‘making adjustments to accommodate to the experienced development and allow the universities to continue the dynamic development’ (Folketinget, 1999). This amendment introduced *development contracts* as the primary governance concept, contracts wherein each HEI — in dialogue with the ministry — established the framework for their activities by establishing goals and strategic priorities (Folketinget, 1999).

#### *Purpose and problem definition*

The purpose of the higher education system emerges in these translations as somewhat different constructs compared to earlier policy translations. The main purpose still seems to be to provide vital knowledge to society, even though industry is placed more in the background. This tendency amounts to a shift towards a more positive role for the higher education system as more proactive and cooperative, rather than a passive system that merely responds to societal and political demands.

They [universities] have moved away from relative isolation, so that both education and research is now marked by increasing cooperation with circles outside the universities ... (Folketinget, 1993)

This purpose and role are increasingly constructed as contingent on institutional capacity and drive, and the manner in which the responsibility for development and progress lies with the institutions themselves is highlighted.

The problem described is that HEIs are lacking accountability. Accountability is translated here in a very broad sense as the placement of responsibility or increasing the transparency of organizational procedures.

First and foremost, it is difficult or impossible to place responsibility for making decisions or for decisions made. With the exception of the rector’s competency to act in certain cases (the so-called residual competency), the university has no leaders (management) who are entitled (have the competency) to act, neither internally nor externally. This makes the universities antiquated and weak joint partners, and the institutional autonomy has been constrained along the way by rigid, central economic control. (Folketinget, 1993)

This problem definition resembles the trend highlighted by several higher education scholars (e.g., Neave and Van Vught, 1991; Trow, 1996) — a development characterized by moving from governing through trust, or professional accountability, to governing through (political) accountability. In the present translation, we see that the problem definition of the 1980s remains visible in the construction of



HEIs as ‘antiquated and weak cooperation partners’ due to their outdated governance and management structures (Folketinget, 1993). The institutional rigidity is therefore still seen as being caused by the democratization of the institutions, but where the problem in the translations in the 1980s was defined as a ‘negative’ problem — a question of value-for-money and taxpayers getting their money’s worth — the problem in the translation in the 1990s increasingly assumes a more positive form, as there is great (and increasing) potential within HEIs that could and should be utilized better.

### *Policy solutions*

The means towards these ends are highly influenced by a notion of institutional autonomy:

The intention of the bill is to present an overall framework enabling the individual university to organize itself appropriately within this framework according to its own needs and traditions. (Folketinget, 1993)

This translation of the autonomy idea still adheres to the Humboldtian ideas of institutional freedom but is now also linked to the idea of (political) accountability (Romzek, 2000). Institutional autonomy is thereby translated as a matter of professionalization and as contingent on strong management, meaning deregulation and increased formal authority. This translation thereby seems even more inspired by NPM ideas than the 1980s translation, which is also clearly visible in the policy solutions.

The proposed solutions are professionalized management structures, meaning more formal authority to the rectors, deans and department heads. Particularly the latter position was strengthened by way of the so-called ‘instruction authority’, allowing the department head to instruct academic staff to perform a certain task — with respect for their ‘free choice of academic methods’ (Folketinget, 1993). This policy solution is clearly influenced by the perception of accountability mentioned above; focusing on transparency and answerability by way of stronger formal authority; that is, knowing who to blame if the potential was not met.

Another solution was the introduction of development contracts. These contracts were launched as a means of transparency, downplaying the element of control that contractualization might otherwise indicate. By introducing development contracts, the goals of HEIs were thought to become more ‘concrete and operational’ (Folketinget, 1999), and they were meant to stimulate ‘renewal, readjustment, clear priorities, outward-orientation, raised level of ambition, and visibility of goals and achievements’ (Folketinget, 1999). As highlighted by Pollitt (1995), contractualization is a key element in NPM as a means towards increased performance management. Such contracts have been widely used in public sector reforms across Europe, where setting up performance targets, indicators, and output objectives has been common. Contractualization has also been applied in higher education systems,





however initially primarily as a consensus-building tool (at least in the Nordic region), where goals are negotiated between the individual institution and the state (Gornitzka *et al.*, 2004). This consensus objective is also seen in the Danish translation, with its focus on accountability as transparency, as opposed to accountability as ‘measurability’.

The development contracts act by combining ideas of autonomy and accountability as a solution to the problem of institutional rigidity and unresponsiveness. The goal of making HEIs fulfil their potential is linked with ‘freedom of internal readjustment’ (Folketinget, 1999), a translation which allows HEIs to emerge as distinctive and individual, as opposed to ‘a system-to-be-governed’, which was the case in the 1970s.

### 2003

As mentioned in the introduction, a major reform of the Danish higher education system was carried out in 2003 — with very loud protests in its wake.<sup>3</sup> On the governance and management front, the main characteristics of the 2003 reform were the formal shift to self-owning institutions, the substitution of the traditionally very powerful collegiate bodies (the senate and faculty councils) with advisory bodies, the transition from elected to appointed leaders on all levels, and the introduction of external majority boards.

#### *Purpose and problem definition*

Even though the reform was quite comprehensive, the translation does not reveal a fundamentally new way of articulating the overall purpose and role of the higher education system. The role of this system is constructed as more active, a strategic partner capable of action in the quest for welfare, but overall it seems as though the purpose of the 2003 translation is very much in line with the 1990s translation.

In the knowledge society, knowledge and education have changed and assume many different shapes. The research and education of the universities is no longer exclusive and reserved for a limited elite. Knowledge is produced and applied by many different organizations, actors, and institutions and often in networks based on knowledge exchange, which is a central part of the committed work of a university. (Folketinget, 2003)

One key difference — indicating a new translation of the very basic assumptions about the purpose and function of the higher education system — is that HEIs are specifically connected to the goals of the government in power:

the universities must assist in creating good and relevant opportunities within the further education area and thereby contribute to fulfilling the government’s goal of high quality education for all. (Folketinget, 2003)



This indicates a far more instrumental notion of the role of higher education than as seen in previous translations.

The definitions of the problem also seem familiar; the lingering bureaucratic inefficiencies of the 1970s and 1980s are again brought forth and problematized, but also increasingly linked to issues such as globalization and demographics. The higher education system thereby assumes the role of a vital and proactive contributor to solutions (Folketinget, 2003). The problem definition is again seen to assume a positive form as a matter of achieving one's potential in the new knowledge economy. The problem that the translation highlights is increasing complexity and rising demands born from an increasing realization of the potential of HEIs in solving society's problems.

The bill is intended to give the universities better conditions and the opportunity to make cross-disciplinary and strategic priorities of their educational, research, and dissemination efforts, as well as society's many, complex, and changing needs. (...) This is imperative, so that new structures are in place when the next major generational change comes in a few years. (...) Otherwise, there is a risk of a decline in research quality and relevance, and there might be research fields where Denmark is no longer in front or no longer conducting new research. This will reduce the significance of the universities as central knowledge- and culture-bearing institutions for Danish society. (Folketinget, 2003)

The central ideas apparently influencing this problem definition are those of openness and responsiveness; that is, promoting a goal of reciprocity between society and HEIs. However the notion of accountability also continues to have impact on the problem definition, as the necessity of accomplishing greater openness and confidence in the 'responsible and professional, efficient utilization of the means' is emphasized (Folketinget, 2003).

### *Policy solutions*

One very central idea emerges when studying the proposed solutions: strategy. Being strategic and not least able to act strategically becomes vital in the 2003 translation, as the idea of strategy proposes a causal link to efficiency. The solutions on the governance and management level, such as the introduction of external majority boards and the transition to appointed leaders on all levels, can be seen as significantly influenced by this idea of strategy, as they are seen to enhance the ability of HEIs to prioritize, be assertive, and flexible; or in other words, to be strategic.

... the universities need greater freedom from central steering and central rules if they are to be able to adapt to these needs and expectations more rapidly.  
This calls for stronger management, which to an even greater extent should be



able to prioritize the varied and complex demands both inside and outside the universities ... (Folketinget, 2003)

The strategy-related arguments are sought strengthened by linking them to notions of competitiveness. By highlighting the international success and competitiveness of ‘first-movers’, that is, Danish HEIs which have been experimenting with some of these measures before they become policy (cf. the 1999 amendment), the solutions gain legitimacy in that they have proven their worth in terms of the problem definitions mentioned above.

The autonomy idea is re-translated, as it is emphasized that the new status as a self-owning institution in effect ‘releases’ HEIs from government control:

The proposal to establish institutional self-ownership with boards and managers that are accountable to this board is a vital prerequisite in order to increase the autonomy of the universities in relation to the minister and the state, which has been a longstanding request from the universities. (Folketinget, 2003)

This means that the autonomy idea of the late 1980s and 1990s is translated to fit the new context and becomes a matter of freedom from the state — not from steering. The influence of the accountability idea is therefore also visible and expanded by highlighting the responsibility of the institutions to manage their own finances and by placing responsibility for protecting academic freedom within the institutions themselves (Folketinget, 2003); if academic freedom was perceived to be encroached upon, it would be due to faulty or non-functioning institutions as opposed to the political system.

All of these policy solutions lie very close to the notion of ‘the entrepreneurial university’ (Clark, 1998), with its focus on collaboration, strategy, the strengthened steering core, and changing governance structures (Clark, 1998; Pinheiro and Stensaker, 2013).

## Discussion

The aim of the study was to illustrate how certain problem definitions are created and how particular solutions are made salient and legitimized in order to illustrate how the environment and decision premises for HEIs are enacted. Even though the Danish higher education system has undergone massive and rather fundamental changes in the past four decades, it was found that the translation and legitimization attempts taking place here are not nearly as radical as the ‘actual’ implementation. The power of traditional ideas seems to influence the translation in a stabilizing manner; for example, in the very first translation, where the power of the Humboldtian ideas of academic freedom and institutional autonomy influenced the translation of the



democratization idea, making it a matter of a division of labour in order to free up time for research instead of, for example, allowing everyone to participate in the name of democracy. Similarly, we see in the new millennium a strong coupling of Humboldtian ideas and notions of accountability and strategy, turning autonomy into a matter of transparency and responsibility to society.

When considering how the purpose and role of HEIs has been translated over time, a noticeable shift becomes apparent, which can be described as going from viewing universities as a traditional knowledge-producing institution to an entrepreneurial university fitting Clark's (1998) description. In this way, the present study echoes the findings of Pinheiro and Stensaker (2013), who speak of a shift from viewing HEIs as an archetypical 'Research University' to an archetypical 'Entrepreneurial University'. This shift is highlighted in the analysis when studying how policy translations have moved from being influenced by ideas highlighting the *institutional characteristics* of HEIs to more *instrumental* and external constructions — on both the problem definition and policy solution levels. This movement becomes clear when looking at how the translations go from defining the 'problem of higher education' as a negative problem of internal structures, for example, that the governance and management structures are obsolete, undemocratic (1970s), or inefficient (1980s), to defining them increasingly as positive problems or problems of potential, such as the need for modernization (1990s) and responsiveness (2000s).

This indicates an ideational shift on a 'deeper' level; that is, on the level of public philosophy. As mentioned, ideas on this level were excluded from the analysis, as they are notoriously difficult to 'see' (Campbell, 2004; Béland and Cox, 2011); however, the analysis has indicated that these public philosophies have possibly also been continually changing — either as a consequence of shifting policy solutions or problem definitions — or *vice versa*. The movement emerges when considering the shift from viewing the value as intrinsic and somewhat undefinable to a belief in the value as more extrinsically defined. The goal of policy defined by the former is to provide the institution with the best conditions for knowledge production within, whereas the latter defines the purpose of policy getting 'societally relevant knowledge' out. This finding resonates with the views advanced by Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff (2000) and Gibbons *et al.* (1994) regarding the changing perceptions of knowledge and its relation to society, in this way offering an ideational perspective on this ongoing debate.

The present study has also contributed to the continuing conceptual development of ideational institutionalism by presenting a case of how global ideas become local — or, more specifically, become policy. Many studies of the translation of ideas deal with the organizational translation, whereas the political translations on the policy level are more scarcely studied from this perspective. Ideational scholars have studied the impact of ideas on policy more intensely (see, e.g., Béland and Cox, 2011), but mainly from a perspective focused on 'spotting' ideas in policy, not analysing their transformational power. As the present study has shown, however, applying the



concept of translation in policy development studies appears to hold some promise, as doing so highlights how ideas change and are changed over time and context — a process which impacts the translating actor and the environment alike.

## Implications for Future Research

As indicated above, the aim was to contribute to the debate and research on the relationship between higher education systems/institutions and the state (e.g., Neave and Van Vught, 1994; Slaughter and Leslie, 1997; Amaral *et al.*, 2003) as well as on the production and perception of knowledge in the knowledge society (e.g., Gibbons *et al.*, 1994; Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 2000; Olsen, 2005).

In addition to presenting a national case study of how these relationships and perceptions have evolved and transformed over time, the present study has pointed out some areas where further research is certainly needed in order to better understand the dynamics of the ideas and translation processes which influence higher education systems globally.

As mentioned, ideas help determine and negotiate our goals, strategies, values, and preferences, and they allow us to act strategically on the basis of these perceived interests. This then raises the question of how the policy translations analysed here are received and made sense of on the institutional and individual levels and how they set the premises for future translations and decisions. In other words, how do these ideas travel on in the higher education system? As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, several studies have shown how the national implementation of policy trends differs (Bleiklie and Kogan, 2007; de Boer and File, 2009), but the present study highlights the need for further research into the translation work that follows varying national implementations of policy trends.

## Notes

- 1 It does not fall within the scope of the present paper to address how ideas are inserted or emerge within a particular field — or why some ideas survive and others do not. For a more elaborate discussion of this perspective, see, for example Mehta (2011).
- 2 Quotes from Danish sources in this section are translated by the author.
- 3 For an overview of the Danish debate on the University Act of 2003, see [http://professorvaelde.blogspot .dk/](http://professorvaelde.blogspot.dk/) (in Danish), accessed 2 February 2014.

## References

- Aagaard, K. (2011) 'Kampen om basismidlerne: Historisk institutionel analyse af basisbevillingsmodellens udvikling på universitetsområdet i Danmark', Ph.D. dissertation, Danish Centre for Studies in Research and Research Policy, Aarhus University.



- Amaral, A., Jones, G.A. and Karseth, B. (eds.) (2002) *Governing Higher Education: National Perspectives on Institutional Governance*, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Amaral, A., Meek, V.L. and Larsen, I.M. (eds.) (2003) *The Higher Education Managerial Revolution?* Vol. 3, Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Andersen, N.Å. and Thygesen, N.T. (2004) 'Styring af styringsværktøjer', *Nordisk Administrativ Tidsskrift* 85(1): 28–37.
- Béland, D. and Cox, R.H. (2011) *Ideas and Politics in Social Science Research Ideas and Politics*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Bleiklie, I. (1998) 'Justifying the evaluative state: New public management ideals in higher education', *Journal of Public Affairs Education* 4(2): 87–100.
- Bleiklie, I. and Kogan, M. (2007) 'Organization and governance of universities', *Higher Education Policy* 20(4): 477–493.
- Blyth, M. (1997) "'Any more bright ideas?'" The ideational turn of comparative political economy', *Comparative Politics* 29(2): 229–250.
- Braun, D. (2006) 'The mix of policy rationales in science and technology policy', *Melbourne Journal of Politics* 31(7): 8–35.
- Callon, M. and Latour, B. (1981) 'Unscrewing the Big Leviathan: How Actors Macro-Structure Reality and How Sociologists Help Them to Do So', in K. Knorr-Cetina and A.V. Cicourel (eds.) *Advances in Social Theory and Methodology*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, pp. 277–303.
- Campbell, J.L. (2002) 'Ideas, politics, and public policy', *Annual Review of Sociology* 28(2): 21–38.
- Campbell, J.L. (2004) *Institutional Change and Globalization*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Carstensen, M.B. (2010) 'The nature of ideas, and why political scientists should care: analysing the Danish jobcentre reform from an ideational perspective', *Political Studies* 58(5): 847–865.
- Christensen, T. (2011) 'University governance reforms: potential problems of more autonomy?' *Higher Education* 62(4): 503–517.
- Christensen, T. and Lægreid, P. (2001) *New Public Management: The Transformation of Ideas and Practice*, Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Clark, B. (1998) *Creating Entrepreneurial Universities, Organisational Pathways of Transformation*, Oxford/New York: Pergamon Elsevier.
- Corbett, A. (2003) 'Ideas, institutions and policy entrepreneurs: towards a new history of higher education in the European Community', *European Journal of Education* 38(3): 315–330.
- Czarniawska, B. (2009) 'Emerging institutions: pyramids or anthills?' *Organization Studies* 30(4): 423–441.
- Czarniawska, B. and Sevón, G. (2005) *Global Ideas: How Ideas, Objects and Practices Travel in a Global Economy*, Malmö: Liber & Copenhagen Business School Press.
- de Boer, H. and File, J. (2009) *Higher Education Governance Reforms across Europe (MODERN Project)*, Brussels: ESMU.
- Degn, L. and Sørensen, M.P. (2012) 'Universitetsloven fra 2003. På vej mod konkurrenceuniversitetet', in K. Aagaard and N. Mejlgård (eds.) *Dansk forskningspolitik efter årtusindskiftet*, Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, pp. 59–94.
- Ejersbo, N. and Greve, C. (2005) *Moderniseringen af den offentlige sektor*, Copenhagen: Børsen.
- European Commission (2005) 'Mobilising the brainpower of Europe: enabling universities to make their full contribution to the Lisbon Strategy', COM 152, Brussels.
- Etzkowitz, H. and Leydesdorff, L. (2000) 'The dynamics of innovation: from National Systems and "Mode 2" to a triple helix of university–industry–government relations', *Research Policy* 29(2): 109–123.
- Fägerlind, I. and Strömqvist, G. (eds.) (2004) *Reforming Higher Education in the Nordic Countries: Studies of Change in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden*, Paris: International Institute for Educational Planning.
- Folketinget (1970) *Forslag til Lov om universiteternes styrelse*, The Danish Parliament: Copenhagen.



- Folketinget (1973) *Forslag til Lov om styrelse af højere uddannelsesinstitutioner*, The Danish Parliament: Copenhagen.
- Folketinget (1988) *Forslag til Lov om ændring af lov om styrelse af højere uddannelsesinstitutioner*, The Danish Parliament: Copenhagen.
- Folketinget (1993) *Forslag til Lov om universiteter*, The Danish Parliament: Copenhagen. Available at: <https://www.retsinformation.dk/Forms/R0710.aspx?id=111293&exp=1>, accessed 2 February 2014.
- Folketinget (1999) *Forslag til Lov om ændring af lov om universiteter m.fl.*, The Danish Parliament: Copenhagen. Available at: [www.retsinformation.dk/Forms/R0710.aspx?id=88632](http://www.retsinformation.dk/Forms/R0710.aspx?id=88632), accessed 2 February 2014.
- Folketinget (2003) *Forslag til Lov om universiteter*, The Danish Parliament: Copenhagen. Available at: [www.retsinformation.dk/Forms/R0710.aspx?id=100418](http://www.retsinformation.dk/Forms/R0710.aspx?id=100418), accessed 2 February 2014.
- Gibbons, M., Limoges, C., Nowotny, H., Schwartzman, S., Scott, P. and Trow, M. (1994) *The New Production of Knowledge: The Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies*, London: Sage.
- Gornitzka, Å. and Maassen, P. (2000) 'National policies concerning the economic role of higher education', *Higher Education Policy* 13(3): 225–230.
- Gornitzka, Å., Stensaker, B., Smeby, J.-C. and de Boer, H. (2004) 'Contract arrangements in the Nordic countries: solving the efficiency-effectiveness dilemma?' *Higher Education in Europe* 29(1): 87–101.
- Hall, P. (1993) 'Policy paradigms, social learning, and the state: the case of economic policymaking in Britain', *Comparative Politics* 25(3): 275–296.
- Hansen, K.E. (1971) *Universiteternes styrelseslov — kommenteret udgave*, Copenhagen: Gads Forlag.
- Hansen, H.F. (2012) 'Fusionsprocesserne: Frivillighed under tvang', in K. Aagaard and N. Mejlgaard (eds.) *Dansk Forskningspolitik efter Årtusindskiftet*, Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, pp. 195–228.
- Hay, C. (2001) 'The "Crisis" of Keynesianism and the Rise of Neoliberalism in Britain: An Ideational Institutional Approach', in J.L. Campbell and O.K. Pedersen (eds.) *The Rise of Neoliberalism and Institutional Analysis*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 193–218.
- Hood, C. (1995) 'The "New Public Management" in the 1980s: variations on a theme', *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 20(2): 93–109.
- Kooiman, J. (2008) 'Exploring the concept of governability', *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice* 10(2): 171–190.
- Latour, B. (1986) 'The Powers of Association', in J. Law (ed.) *Power, Action and Belief*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, pp. 261–277.
- Menahem, G. (2008) 'The transformation of higher education in Israel since the 1990s: the role of ideas and policy paradigms', *Governance: An International Journal of Policy, Administration, and Institutions* 21(4): 499–526.
- Mehta, J. (2011) 'The Varied Roles of Ideas in Politics: From "Whether" to "How"', in D. Béland and R.H. Cox (eds.) *Ideas and Politics in Social Science Research Ideas and Politics*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Mukhtarov, F. (2012) 'Rethinking the travel of ideas: policy translation in the water sector', *Policy & Politics*, doi:10.1332/030557312X655459.
- Neave, G. and van Vught, F. (eds.) (1991) *Prometheus Bound, the Changing Relationship between Government and Higher Education in Western Europe*, London: Pergamon.
- Neave, G. and van Vught, F. (eds.) (1994) *Government and Higher Education Relationships across Three Continents: The Winds of Change*, Oxford: Pergamon.
- OECD (2009) *Higher Education to 2030, Volume 2. Globalisation*, Paris: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.
- Olsen, J.P. (2005) *The Institutional Dynamics of the (European) University*, Oslo: ARENA — Centre for European Studies, University of Oslo.
- Paradeise, C., Ferlie, E., Bleiklie, I. and Reale, E. (eds) (2009) *University Governance: Western European Comparative Perspectives*, Dordrecht: Springer.



- Petersen, N. (1997) 'Autonomy and Professionalism — Danish Higher Education and the Problems of State Interference', in K.D. Wolff (ed.) *Autonomy and External Control: The University in Search of the Golden Mean*, Munich: Ludicium verlag GmbH, pp. 155–168.
- Piironen, O. (2013) 'The transnational idea of university autonomy and the reform of the Finnish universities act', *Higher Education Policy* 26(1): 127–146.
- Pinheiro, R. and Stensaker, B. (2013) 'Designing the entrepreneurial university: the interpretation of a global idea', *Public Organization Review*, published online on 20 July 2013, doi:10.1007/s11115-013-0241-z.
- Polanyi, M. (1962) 'The republic of science: its political and economic theory', *Minerva* 1(1): 54–73.
- Pollitt, C. (1995) 'Justification by works or by faith? Evaluating the new public management', *Evaluation* 1(2): 133–154.
- Rhodes, R.A.W., Binder, S.A. and Rockman, B.A. (2008) *The Oxford Handbook of Political Institutions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Romzek, B.S. (2000) 'Dynamics of public accountability in an era of reform', *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 66(1): 21–44.
- Sahlin, K. and Wedlin, L. (2008) 'Circulating Ideas: Imitation, Translation and Editing', in R. Greenwood, C. Oliver, R. Suddaby and K. Sahlin-Andersson (eds.) *Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism*, Thousand Oaks: SAGE, pp. 218–242.
- Schmidt, V.A. (2008) 'Discursive institutionalism: the explanatory power of ideas and discourse', *Annual Review of Political Science* 11: 303–326.
- Slaughter, S. and Leslie, L.L. (1997) *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies, and the Entrepreneurial University*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Trow, M. (1996) 'Trust, markets and accountability in higher education: a comparative perspective', *Higher Education Policy* 9(4): 309–324.
- Wandel, C.F. (1985) *Betænkning nr. 1055 fra Udvalget til forberedelse af en revision af lov om styrelse af højere uddannelsesinstitutioner*. Available at: [http://www.statensnet.dk/betaenkninger/1001-1200/1055-1985/1055-1985\\_pdf/searchable\\_1055-1985.pdf](http://www.statensnet.dk/betaenkninger/1001-1200/1055-1985/1055-1985_pdf/searchable_1055-1985.pdf), accessed 2 February 2014.



Chapter 5:  
Sensemaking, sensegiving and  
strategic management in Danish  
higher education

Article invited for revision and resubmission in *Higher Education* – resubmitted in June 2014

# Sensemaking, sensegiving and strategic management in Danish higher education

## Abstract:

Strategic management and leadership has been a vital catchphrase in most European higher education reforms over the past decade, and has in many countries resulted in a strengthening of the top level management tiers. Rectors and Deans are increasingly tasked with the responsibility of turning HEI's into more active, entrepreneurial actors in society, and are in this way required to take on and inhabit the role as strategic managers to a much higher degree than ever seen before in higher education systems. This role, apart from being new to many of the managers, is at the same time complicated by the upending of the traditional governance structures, and the rigorous defense of the very same structures stemming from the academic staff. The article examines how these strategic managers simultaneously attempt to make sense and give sense in the face of these changing circumstances, and how new and old ideas, values and norms play into these processes. The findings suggest that while traditional academic norms may still be very influential, new ideas about HEI's have found their way into both sensemaking and sensegiving efforts, and that both old and new ideas significantly affect the goal construction and strategic management practice.

Keywords: sensemaking; strategic management; leadership; academic values; sensegiving

## Introduction

Strategic management and leadership has been a vital catchphrase in most European higher education reforms over the past decade; most often presented as a means to ensure that higher education institutions play a more active, entrepreneurial role in society – for the good of students, staff and not least the national economy (see e.g. Folketinget 2003; Bayenet et al. 2000; de Boer & File 2009). The demand for interaction with society is linked to the increasing coupling of higher education institutions and the performance of national systems in the globalized economy – the knowledge economy (e.g. EC 2005). This increasing focus on *strategy*, coupled with rising demands for responsiveness, has in many European countries resulted in a significant strengthening of the power of the top tiers of the internal governance structures, cf. Rectors and Deans, to enable them to make ‘the tough decisions’ and be held accountable for them. These tough decisions often include constructing and implementing visions, reform programs and organizational transformations, to make higher education institutions more customer oriented, responsive and competitive (de Boer & File 2009; Meek et al. 2010). The top level managers<sup>1</sup> are in this way required to take on and inhabit the role as strategic managers to a much higher degree than ever seen before in

---

<sup>1</sup> In this paper Rectors and Deans are referred to as strategic managers as opposed to strategic leaders. The Danish language holds only one word which covers both English terms and the term strategic manager has been chosen in the present paper - not as an indication that leadership elements are not prevalent in the roles of Rector and Dean, but because it to highlight the links with such concepts as New Managerialism and New Public Management, which have been highly influential on the higher education sector in Denmark.

higher education systems. This role, apart from being new to many of the managers, is at the same time complicated by the upending of the traditional governance structures, and the rigorous defense of the very same structures stemming from the academic staff.

In Denmark, as well as in other European countries, the straight line between the top level managers and the strategic decisions made is curved by the simultaneous implementation of external majority boards as the supreme authority in higher education institutions, and the demand for academic reputation as a means for obtaining legitimacy amongst the academic staff (Degn & Sørensen 2012). The present article reports from a study that set out to explore how the top level managers (Rectors and Deans) in two Danish universities attempt to navigate between sometimes conflicting demands, and simultaneously make sense of their new role, while acting in it. It investigates how the top level managers make sense of their changing role, what factors influence this sensemaking, and how this affects the strategic goals they set up. The aim is to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on how leaders think and act in higher education (Pietilä 2013; Kezar 2012; Henkel 2000; 2005; Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991; Gioia & Thomas 1996), and on how new ideas transform and interact with existing norms and values (Czarniawska & Sevón 2005; Béland & Cox 2011; Menahem 2008).

In higher education, top level managers have in many countries gone from being *primi inter pares* leaders, chosen amongst their peers, to appointed, and in most cases more *professional* managers, indicating that the importance of having the ‘right manager’ has not gone unnoticed by policy makers. Strategies are assumed to “*reflect the values of top managers*” (Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991, p. 434) which means that the recruitment at this level is of vital importance to the strategic direction of the institution. The values and norms of top level managers are therefore now a political concern, as the trend towards institutional autonomy and professionalized strategic managers is discursively linked with the knowledge economy concept; a coupling which connects higher education institutions closely to the value-producing apparatus (Bayenet et al. 2000; Stensaker et al. 2007).

These extensive changes at the top tiers of the university management system have created an air of uncertainty within the higher education institutions, as they represent a part of a massive upending of the traditional academic governance system and have introduced new positions, new legislation and new values into the higher education system and particularly into the management structure. Several studies have however suggested that the academic values and norms are still very influential and “constricting” even for external top level managers (e.g. Meek et al. 2010; Deem et al. 2007), and that the new ideas about strategic capacity, accountability, responsiveness etc. may not be as pervasive as they were expected to be. The managers of the new structures are also, in many countries, mainly recruited from within the organizations – or at least from within academia – and are thus to a high degree ‘brought up’ with the academic values of academic governance, collegiality and self-management. They are thereby navigating between demands from without and within; attempting to implement strategic changes in highly institutionalized organizations (Scott 1995) to achieve goals defined (partially) by external stakeholders, e.g. by the political system, while at the same time maintaining the respect and legitimacy needed to actually carry out the changes within the organization.

## Sensemaking and sensegiving in higher education – a framework for analysis

This complex situation calls for both sensemaking, i.e. the creation of meaning from the flux of impulses that the managers are confronted with, and sensegiving, i.e. the communication of a vision or plan, in a way that maximizes the possibility of success (Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991; Weick 1995; Weick et al. 2005; Rouleau 2005; Hope 2010; Bartunek et al. 1999). Sensemaking and sensegiving as theoretical concepts provide concepts for looking at how disruptions of existing practice, uncertainty and ambiguity leads people to rethink and reorganize how they perceive themselves and their role within the organization (see e.g. Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991), Humphreys and Brown (2002) or Smerek (2011) for examples of sensemaking/sensegiving studies in higher education settings). The argument in the present article is that examining the sensemaking and sensegiving of top level managers provide valuable insight into the processes that lead to strategies instead of examining the strategies themselves.

Sensemaking, following Karl E. Weick, “unfolds as a sequence in which people concerned with identity in the social context of other actors engage ongoing circumstances from which they extract cues and make plausible sense retrospectively, while enacting more or less order into those ongoing circumstances” (Weick et al. 2005, p. 409). This definition of sensemaking entails many discrete dimensions, but for the purpose of the present study I shall focus on just three of them, namely the identity concern, the social context and the enactment dimension.

When faced with an ambiguous or confusing situation, people tend to respond with questions of identity, like “who are we” and “how do we do things” (Mills et al. 2010, p. 1889). The process of constructing answers to these questions can be seen as sensemaking, where individuals (or organizations) connect cues (events, ideas, etc.) with frames (cognitive frames, mental models etc.) in order to construct a working story of identity; a self which corresponds with the perception of the world. This process allows the sensemaker to continue acting in an otherwise confusing situation by affording a “*general orientation to situations that maintain esteem and consistency of one’s self-conceptions*” (Ring & Van de Ven 1989, p. 180, quoted in Weick 1995). Erez and Earley claim that sensemaking as a process is designed to accommodate three basic needs for every individual, namely the needs for self-enhancement, self-efficacy, and self-consistency (Erez & Earley 1993; Weick 1995; Brown et al. 2008). These three identity-needs frame how cues are picked out, as they bias the attention towards cues that strengthen feelings of positive self-image, competence and continuity. These cues are then connected to salient frames and the question of identity construction is thereby also seen as a question of choosing between multiple identities and selecting the one that is appropriate in a given situation or “*to shift among definitions of self*” (Weick 1995, p. 20). These different definitions of self and the process wherein they are selected for representation can be highly influential and are therefore critical study objects; as Porac et al. (1989) have argued, the mental models of decision-makers are key to understanding strategic behavior. Similarly Weick has shown in his seminal study of the Mann Gulch disaster, that (extreme) crisis situations leads individuals to revert to their familiar sense of identity and the action pattern associated with this, ignoring both organizational hierarchy and direct orders (Weick 1993). Within the present study the importance of identity construction is demonstrated by looking at how particular representations of self

emerges in the sensemaking narratives and how these constructions strengthen feelings of self-enhancement, self-efficacy and self-consistency.

The process of identity construction described above is also guided by other, more structural factors, such as “an organization’s rules, routines, symbols, and language [which] will all have an impact on an individual’s sensemaking activities and provide routines or scripts for appropriate conduct” (Mills et al. 2010, p. 185). This means that a sensemaker is never alone in his/her attempt to create and project meaning – others are present either by direct interaction or by proxy via the institutions of language, routines etc., or via the imagined expectations of others. Sensemaking is seen to be a social process, which always takes place in the imagined or actual presence of others, taking into account the imagined scripts, mental modes etc. of these others, as they are e.g. represented by the symbols and language of the organization. This has also been conceptualized by other theorists, e.g. social identity scholars who contribute with knowledge on how salient group classifications are part of what is termed the “social identity” (Ashforth & Mael 1989), and how the perceived image of the organization with which one identifies, i.e. how I think other people perceive my organization, can be very influential on the perceptions and interpretations of issues within the organization (Dutton & Dukerich 1991). When investigating sensemaking and sensegiving processes, it is thereby arguably important to look for the different audiences that can potentially be emphasized in the sensemaking processes. Staff – academic as well as administrative –, students, society, the political system etc. all constitute potential audiences to a top level higher education manager.

A final characteristic of the sensemaking/sensegiving process is that by way of enactment the sensemaker constructs his own environment and the premises for future sensemaking and sensegiving processes – both for himself and for others. By creating order and categories from which future sensemaking processes can extract meaning, sensemaking processes are thereby also seen as enacting a social order. This thus also becomes part of a sensegiving process, which describes the other side of the coin (Rouleau 2005); the way managers (or others) attempt to ‘sell’ a message and gain influence on how others make sense. Sensegiving is often conceptualized as the strategic or intentional side of sensemaking, where an individual (or group) try to sway or influence the sensemaking of others to obtain certain goals. Gioia and Chittipeddi describe sensegiving as the management’s attempt to provide the employees with a “*viable interpretation of a new reality*” and influencing them “*to adopt it as their own*” (1991, p. 433). It is in this respect important to note that this interpretation is itself a result of a sensemaking process and therefore a contingent construction.

In the following analysis of the empirical case, I shall demonstrate how the social nature of the identity construction affects the enactment and sensegiving of top level managers in Danish higher education institutions. The aim is thereby to contribute to the ongoing development of the sensemaking framework (e.g. Mills et al. 2010; Maitlis 2005; Bartunek et al. 1999), by focusing on a few key features of the perspective and investigating how they contribute to an empirical study of sensemaking ‘in action’. However the main goal of the present study remains to add to the growing body of knowledge about higher education management and governance, by shedding light on the practice and reflections on practice that characterize the new strategic managers.

## Methodology

The empirical case is a study of the sensemaking and sensegiving processes of top level managers from 2 Danish universities. These two universities were chosen for their quite distinct individual characteristics – one a relatively traditional Mode 1-university and the other a newer, more Mode 2 oriented-university - in order to investigate differences in the way that sensemaking and sensegiving processes play out in different organizational settings, cf. the framework described above. In the two universities, 10 Deans and Rectors were interviewed about their perceptions of higher education management in general, their own role as strategic managers (sensemaking) and about how they go about the task of producing strategies for the university (sensegiving). Both former as well as current top level managers were chosen for interviews to try and capture any changes in the perception and sensemaking surrounding the role as top level manager. The interviews were designed as semi-structured with much room to digress from the interview-guide and pursue subjects and themes that the respondents deemed meaningful in order to keep the sensemaking as open as possible. However, there is little doubt that an interview session in itself is a driver of sensemaking, or at the very least a ‘forced’ verbalization of an ongoing and perhaps unconscious process. By asking specific questions, the interview session frames the sensemaking process and affords specific cues. I argue however that by allowing the respondent to digress and construct a personal narrative, the interviews are seen as a good window into the continuing sensemaking processes of the managers. The following sections will illustrate and analyze the findings of the study and discuss the implications of these findings.

### The sensemaking and sensegiving of the top level managers

#### **The role as strategic manager – sensemaking as identity construction**

An important part of the sensemaking perspective is as mentioned that sensemaking is about identity construction. In the following section focus is on how particular selves are brought forth in the narratives and given priority – and how this frames and influences the cues that are picked out. Issues of self-enhancement, self-efficacy and self-consistency are emphasized as well as the balance between new ideas about higher education and “*routines or scripts for appropriate conduct*” (Mills et al. 2010, p. 185).

*Being a strong academic person* emerges in all the narratives as an important definition of self. All the respondents highlight their background in academia, e.g. either as a strong researcher or as a dedicated teacher, and very often link their role as a manager with this background. One respondent speaks of the importance of having “paid ones dues” and “knowing what it takes”, while others similarly emphasize that their knowledge of the academic practice, norms and standards, which stems from their background as researchers/teachers aids them in their practice as managers, e.g. by being a source of legitimacy in their dealings with academic staff.

“... I found that it was very important that you (...) were able to demonstrate that you had some knowledge about what was going on [in the research field of the employee]. Otherwise I don’t think that there will respect surrounding the managers. So your authority is tied, of course main-

ly to you as a person, but also to the fact that you have an academic background and know the conditions in terms of being an employee at a university.”

In this way, a certain ‘academic frame’ is given priority, both as a means of linking the sense of self to the academic community and by aiding the managers in telling a story about the importance of the traditional academic norms and values to the relevant audience, i.e. both sensemaking and sensegiving. The language which is spoken and the arguments that are used to create consistency in this way resemble arguments of “classic academia”, even though some of these ‘classic academic’ values and principles are seen as symbolic and counterproductive in modern HEIs.

This can be seen as an example of how routines and scripts are still vitally influencing how managers perceive their space for action and resources as a manager. The academic link in order to ‘get things done’ or even be taken seriously as a manager and being able to speak the relevant language is key. Several respondents reflected on the symbolic nature of the legitimacy that lay in this academic ballast, e.g. by stating that the further up the hierarchy you get the more basic and superficial your knowledge of all the research fields and disciplines you are expected to be familiar with becomes, but it nevertheless emerged as a vital frame in all the narratives across the board. Also the ‘primus inter pares’ principle both acts as a frame in the identity construction processes, e.g. when the respondents highlight their achievements in research or teaching, their extensive academic networks etc., while it at the same time is being dismissed as obsolete and in reality inefficient.

The background and personal experiences as a researcher cater to all three identity-needs, i.e. self-enhancement, self-efficacy and self-consistency. The frame aids the managers in maintaining a positive self-concept (self-enhancement), by emphasizing scales of evaluation with which the managers can be successful. This is exemplified by the tendency among the respondents to bring forth past experiences, when describing being met with mistrust or a sense of alienation from the academic staff; threats against a positive state about the self. The academic background, e.g. descriptions of “paying their dues”, references to their vast publication record or extensive teaching experience and reputation etc., thereby serves as a very powerful frame which helps them ‘dismiss’ such cues (mistrust and alienation) as unjustified. Another frame that could have been evoked to dismiss mistrust or alienation could be distancing oneself from the academic frame, e.g. by evoking external, new ideas about responsibility and societal engagement, but this does not seem to be a vital part of the identity construction.

Self-efficacy is strengthened by constructing a story in which their perception of personal strengths is meaningful, i.e. where their experience is a capacity or indeed a necessity for performing well. As mentioned the concept of self-efficacy describes the tendency of individuals to seek out tasks and situations in which they believe they will be successful – and in this perspective also construct such situations by connecting cues with salient frames, as it was the case when the top level managers spoke about power and authority. As mentioned their formal power and authority was reinforced significantly in the reforms of the new millennium, but this formal authority is notably absent in the sensemaking narratives. Perhaps surprisingly, the new governance structures and the strengthened formal position of the top level managers are mentioned very little in the narratives – for good or for

bad. The notion of authority is on the other hand almost consistently linked with legitimacy and culture as we saw above.

“I have tried sometimes to make some ‘top-down’ initiatives, which has always been met with friendliness and understanding from the people I have approached, and then they told me: I honestly think that you should do that yourself, because I am busy with something else”

The quote illustrates a common construction of authority stemming not from structures, but from the support and help of the staff – thereby tying the cue of formal authority to the frame of *being a strong academic*. This illustrates how the top level managers tend to make sense of their new, more powerful role, by constructing a situation or a set of circumstances wherein their background as an academic and the ensuing knowledge of the academic system, the norms and values are strengths and capacities, thus increasing their chances of being successful.

Finally, being a strong academic person also serves the need for the self-consistency; a need which is seen to direct individuals towards information that is congruent and consistent with their perception of self, and to contribute incongruent information to situational factors. This motivation is evident when the managers in the present study speak of having paid their dues, where the frame of being a strong academic person helps create a story of belonging; of being entitled to the position as a top level manager. Other respondents speak of their position as a natural progression, and being encouraged to apply for the job which enables them to have a stable self-image over time and not perceive the top level management position as a radical break with their constructed sense of identity (Erez & Earley 1993). However this self-consistency is also typically strengthened via an extraction of cues that differentiate the sensemakers from their previous peers, creating a reason for leaving academia and becoming a manager. Such cues are e.g. specific personality traits (the superior ability to organize and inspire others or the innate sense of strategy) or communal (having visions and ambitions for the specific organization, being better for the organization than the previous managers).

### **The practice of strategic management – sensemaking as a social process**

This analysis of the identity construction dimension of the top level managers’ sensemaking processes illustrates the resilience of the academic ideas about higher education governance and management, and how they are still valued highly and employed actively. The academic norms and principles may be explicitly or implicitly criticized by the managers, but they seem to implicitly influence the way they construct themselves as managers, and the way they feel they need to appear to others.

However as demonstrated above, the present study shows that being a *strong academic person* – in the sensemaking narratives of Danish top level higher education managers – is not the same as being a *strong academic*. The top level managers have remolded and redefined their sense of self, from their past identity as an academic (researcher/teacher) to a manager with an academic background. The question remains why exactly this frame is brought forth and deemed appropriate, at the expense of other potential frames. Following the sensemaking framework I argue that this selection process is highly



influenced by the sensemaker's perception of audience. Sense is in other words made, knowing that it will need to be given on – that decisions will need to be implemented and thereby appropriated and sanctioned by others, which makes these 'others' and their perceived values and norms important. To elaborate further on this social aspect of the sense-making processes of top level managers, we now turn to the enactment side of sensemaking, i.e. how the managers produce the environment they face by way of setting goals and determining means towards these goals. Goal setting is a vital part of strategic management and also of sensemaking and sensegiving, as it enacts a sense of direction, which in turn excludes other possible directions. By setting or constructing a goal the top level managers create the environment in which they act, and thereby also the premises of the sensemaking of others. The following section will thereby provide a picture of how the top level managers produce the "*viable interpretation of new reality*" (Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991, p. 433) that they give on to their employees.

The sensemaking narratives of the top level managers reveal three distinct categories of goals, highlighting the complexity of the top level manager role and of the audiences which influence it.

The first category comprises a set of normative goals, where the external impulses and ideas about higher education play a vital role. These goals are often described as goals that are "*naturally necessary for the society at large*", that are "*obviously reasonable*" etc. They are in other words described in a somewhat de-personalized manner and not as personal goals or linked to the sensemaking process. These goals can be named the *externalized strategic goals* and are typically connected to societal frames or to more normative frames, as goals that the universities are obliged to work towards, but not as goals that the managers see as personally fulfilling. This is often illustrated when the respondents speak of the core tasks of the higher education institutions, i.e. research and teaching, and when addressing the 'grand challenges', as in the quote below.

"it's obvious, that if we are to handle some of the problems we have, [...] climate issues and so on, then we need to have cooperation crosswise – they cannot be handled technically these things"

This goal is not a personalized goal of the respondent – it is a more generalized goal construction used as part of a sensegiving exercise directed at a specific audience. The audience that emerges when speaking of this type of goals can be seen as an external one and these goals are thereby a part of the story that the top level managers wish to tell about themselves and their organization. Even though they vary in specificity and direction (e.g. to be "*excellent in research*", "*contribute to the knowledge society*"), the externalized goal constructions are mainly concerned with legitimizing the practice of the universities to an external audience, which is done by linking them with the impulses that are experienced as being relevant to this external audience, mainly society and the political system. Another audience which can be seen to play a (minor) role in the construction of the externalized goals is the internal one, namely the members of their own organization, in that they also tend towards constructing future challenges for the universities, such as being able to compete with other institutions in order to remain in existence, which legitimizes the direction

by the goals.

The second category of goals is often, as with the externalized goals above, described in very loose terms and frequently framed as the things that “make a difference”. One example of such a construction is the following:

”Well, my goal was basically to strengthen research in the university, so we could get a boost in prestige and also introduce a culture where people prioritized research”

Even though this might seem as a somewhat vague goal formulation, it is nevertheless closely linked to the perception of personal strength, and also to the academic background described above, which links it closer to the sensemaking of the respondent. This is what distinguishes them from the first set of goals – the *externalized strategic goals*, which were de-personalized – namely that they are constructed and linked to a personal frame. The goal in the quote above was expressed by a manager whose identity construction was closely linked to a previous career as a distinguished researcher. Research and research excellence were critical frames in this manager’s sensemaking process and the goal is clearly influenced by this sense of self. These goals are also experienced as more conflictual and in many cases where the ‘actual’ leadership and management takes place. In the example above the respondent set the goal of introducing and building a culture of “thinking research” in a culture where teaching had been the primary focus and the primary source of income. This resulted in some quite radical changes in the organization, where both the economic and study structures were transformed in order to achieve the personal strategic goal.

This illustrates a common tendency in the narratives: namely that the external impulses and ideas about higher education (e.g. their role in the solution of grand challenges, the need for accountability, value-for-money etc.) are less influential than the sense of personal strength in the construction of what could be named *personal strategic goals*, i.e. they are goals that the managers want to achieve, not because they feel obliged to, but because it is connected to sense of personal fulfillment. Typically, when speaking of these goals the narratives of the top level managers takes the form of a quest, describing how they overcame obstacles in order to get to where they wanted. In this way these personal strategic goals are more connected to their need for self-enhancement and feeling of self-efficacy, i.e. the need to maintain a positive self-image and feeling of being competent within their role, by setting themselves as the protagonist in a positive story of development. The construction of the personalized strategic goals can be seen as much more connected to sensemaking than to sensegiving – and the audience that emerges is therefore naturally to a much higher degree the internal, academic one, cf. the frame of being an academic person analyzed above.

The final group of goals that we see in the narratives is what one might call *operational goals*. These goals are aimed at the organization as such and towards strengthening the structures and operations of the organization. Often they are described as “cleaning up the mess” or “sorting things out” – frequently in the economy, but also improving the structures and frames, which are perceived as vital in order to achieve the strategic and the necessary goals:

”... first of all to get the economy in control, so we knew what we had to deal with and subsequently implement the economic model that works.”

These goals are also closely connected to the perception of personal strengths and can thereby also be seen as an effort to enhance the feeling of self-efficacy, i.e. the need to feel competent in the performance of tasks. Interestingly, many of the operational goals also seem to be influenced by new notions of accountability and responsibility – and also in many cases ideas about good governance or creating a good psychosocial working environment. This might be an indication that at this level of goal formulation, new ideas have had some impact. It is clear that in the formulation of operational goals, the top level managers attempt to address some of the structures and cultural aspects that they perceive to be counter to the implementation of the strategic goals, but also that these obstacles/challenges are connected to the a perception of the existing structures and culture as rigid. The audience is thereby both internal and external, as the goals both serve the need for legitimacy in the relation with the external audience, but also the need for self-efficacy and self-enhancement.

## Discussion and conclusions

The primary questions of the present paper were how the top level strategic managers make sense and give sense of their role as strategic managers; particularly how new ideas about higher education governance and management are balanced with more established ideas and frames and how this sensemaking and sensegiving affects the practice as strategic managers. The study has shown that even though traditional norms and values are still very influential, newer ideas about accountability, strategy and transparency have certainly found their way into the goal-setting and identity constructions of higher education managers in Denmark.

One interesting finding of the study has been the degree to which the academic background is consistently used as a frame in the sensemaking processes and how this affects the cues that are extracted from the changing circumstances. *Being an academic person* as distinct from being an academic is shown to be a highly salient frame, which lends meaning to both the construction of identity, cf. the three identity needs, and also to the cues that are extracted, c.f. the dismissal of mistrust and alienation from academic staff or the legitimacy of academic staff as superior to formal authority. This illustrates how powerful frames academic norms and values really are – both in personal sensemaking and in organizational sensegiving. The analysis has shown that by looking through the sensemaking/sensegiving framework, academic frames emerge as both crucial to the top level managers’ construction of self; working as anchors in the identity construction process, and also as vital statements and legitimizers; acting as symbols and ‘justifications’ in the stories that are told. As illustrated above, the collegiate governance idea and the *primus inter pares* principle still acts as a frame when highlighting “having lived the life” and the importance of being able to speak the language and understand the conditions of being a researcher, even though the ideas and principles are simultaneously described as symbolic and even as expressions of “*academic arrogance*”. This however should not be seen as contradicting or as attempts of ‘window dressing’, but as a sign that scripts, routines and institutions might

be more significant in the ongoing sensemaking processes, than is consciously recognized by the top level managers.

Another key finding of the present study has been how the managers' sensemaking processes impacted the goal setting – and thereby the strategic management of the higher education institutions. Goal setting is seen as an integrate part of sensemaking and sensegiving by representing the enactment of specific constructions of meaning and as the premises of the sensemaking of others. They are thus also a representation of the *practice* of strategic management. As demonstrated above, even though the substantive content of the goals differs, there seems to be three similar patterns of goal constructions, namely externalized strategic goals, personal strategic goals and operational goals, each constructed in the presence of different (constellations of) audiences. The externalized goals e.g. mainly target an external audience and can thereby be seen as mainly a sensegiving attempt, whereas the personalized goals both serve as sensemaking and sensegiving. The personal strategic goals can often be seen as the managers' *translations* of the externalized strategic goals; a personalization of depersonalized visions. They are a representation of how the top level managers choose certain cues out of a variety of possible problem definitions, connect them to a personal frame, and enact this back into their environment by way of specific initiatives and decisions. The externalized strategic goals are often part of a powerful social discourse that any strategic manager would be hard pressed to circumvent – and thereby the recognition and articulation of these goals act as sensegiving to the external (political, societal) audience. Another characteristic of these goals is that they are rarely accompanied by particular means, or descriptions of actions/enactments. They remain on the more abstract level. The personal strategic goals can on the other hand be seen to represent the managers' attempt at creating a meaning that both allow them to maintain a positive self-relation, and also one that they believe to be “digestible” to their internal audience, i.e. the academic staff that should help achieve the goals, thereby supporting the findings of e.g. Czarniawska, who point to the importance of translation processes in organizations (Czarniawska-Joerges & Sevón 1996; Czarniawska 2009).

As demonstrated, the externalized and personalized goals are accompanied by more concrete goals like “sorting out the economy”, “making the organization run smooth” etc.. Interestingly, new (externally constructed) ideas seem to have the highest impact on the externalized strategic goals – but also on these operational goals. This indicates that the new ideas primarily impact *sensegiving* rather than *sensemaking*, as these two categories of goals are more linked to these outward-oriented processes. As shown in the analysis above the personalized strategic goals are more closely connected to the sensemaking processes of the individual manager, and thus to their perception of personal strengths and the need for self-enhancement and self-efficacy, indicating that traditional norms, values, routines and scripts are more influential on the identity construction of the top level managers, than the newer ideas of strategy, professionalism etc.

In general the study has shown that the sensemaking processes of the top level managers seem to serve a vital purpose in that it helps constructing themselves as agents by setting their own goals – translating the ideas and impulses in relation to their own sense of self. In this way sensemaking can be seen as a means for empowerment.

The study thereby supports the findings of Henkel (2000; 2005), Meek et al (2010), Deem, Reed, and Hillyard (2007) which have all pointed to the importance of traditional academic norms in changing higher education systems, and has added to this knowledge by investigating both the process in which these norms and values affect identity construction, and also how they affect the enactment, i.e. the practice of setting up goals for the top level managers.

The question that remains is how the goals that are set up by these managers are received and made sense of on other levels of the organization. Further research into how sensemaking and sensegiving plays out amongst academic staff and how the goals of the top level managers play into these processes would be of great value in terms of understanding the complex relationship between highly institutionalized norms and values and powerful new ideas.

## Literature

- Ashforth, B.E. & Mael, F. (1989). Social Identity Theory and the Organization. *The Academy of Management Review*, 14(1), 20-39.
- Bartunek, J.M., Krim, R.M., Necochea, R. & Humphries, M. (1999). Sensemaking, sensegiving, and leadership in strategic organizational development. *Advances in Qualitative Organizational Research*, 2, 37-71.
- Bayenet, B., Feola, C. & Tavernier, M. (2000). Strategic Management of Universities: Evaluation Policy and Policy Evaluation. *Higher Education Management*, 12(2), 65-80.
- Béland, D. & Cox, R.H. (eds.) (2011). *Ideas and Politics in Social Science Research*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brown, A.D., Stacey, P. & Nandhakumar, J. (2008). Making Sense of Sensemaking Narratives. *Human Relations*, 61(8), 1035-62.
- Czarniawska-Joerges, B. & Sevón, G. (eds.) (1996). *Translating organizational change*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Czarniawska-Joerges, B. & Sevón, G. (eds.) (2005). *Global ideas: How Ideas, Objects and Practices Travel in the Global Economy*. Malmö: Liber and Copenhagen Business School Press.
- Czarniawska, B. (2009). Emerging Institutions: Pyramids or Anthills? *Organization Studies*, 30, 423 -441.
- de Boer, H. & File, J. (2009). Higher education governance reforms across Europe (MODERN project). Brussels, ESMU.
- Deem, R., Hillyard, S. & Reed, M. (2007). Knowledge, higher education, and the new managerialism: the changing management of UK universities. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Degn, L. & Sørensen, M. P. (2012). Universitetsloven fra 2003. På vej mod konkurrenceuniversitetet. In K. Aagaard & N. Mejlgaard (eds.), *Dansk forskningspolitik efter årtusindskiftet* (pp. 59-93). Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag.
- Dutton, J.E. & Dukerich, J.M. (1991). Keeping an Eye on the Mirror: Image and Identity in Organizational Adaptation. *The Academy of Management Journal*, 34(3), 517-554.

- Erez, M. & Earley, P.C. (1993). *Culture, self-identity and work*. New York: Oxford University Press
- EC (2005). Mobilising the Brainpower of Europe: Enabling Universities to Make their full Contribution to the Lisbon Strategy. Brussels: European Commission.
- Folketinget (2003). Forslag til Lov om universiteter. Copenhagen: The Danish Parliament. [www.retsinformation.dk/Forms/R0710.aspx?id=100418](http://www.retsinformation.dk/Forms/R0710.aspx?id=100418).
- Gioia, D.A. & Chittipeddi, K. (1991). Sensemaking and sensegiving in strategic change initiation. *Strategic Management Journal*, 12, 433-448.
- Gioia, D.A. & Thomas, J.B. (1996). Identity, Image, and Issue Interpretation: Sensemaking During Strategic Change in Academia. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 41(3), 370-403.
- Henkel, M. (2000). *Academic Identities and Policy Change in Higher Education*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Henkel, M. (2005). Academic identity and autonomy in a changing policy environment. *Higher Education*, 49(1-2), 155-176.
- Hope, O. (2010). The Politics of Middle Management Sensemaking and Sensegiving. *Journal of Change Management*, 10(2), 195-215.
- Humphreys, M. & Brown, A.D. (2002). Narratives of organizational identity and identification: A case study of hegemony and resistance. *Organization Studies*, 23, 421-447.
- Kezar, A. (2012). Understanding sensemaking/sensegiving in transformational change processes from the bottom up. *Higher Education*, 65(6), 761-780.
- Maitlis, S. (2005). The Social Processes of Organizational Sensemaking. *Academy of Management Journal*, 48(1), 21-49.
- Meek, V. L., Goedegebuure, L., Santiago, R. & Carvalho, T. (eds.) (2010). *The Changing Dynamics of Higher Education Middle Management*. Dordrecht: Springer Science+Business Media B.V.
- Menahem, G. (2008). The Transformation of Higher Education in Israel since the 1990s: The Role of Ideas and Policy Paradigms. *Governance: An International Journal of Policy, Administration, and Institutions*, 21(4), 499-526.
- Mills, J.H., Thurlow, A. & Mills, A.J. (2010). Making sense of sensemaking: the critical sensemaking approach. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, 5(2), 182-195.
- Pietilä, M. (2013). The many faces of research profiling: academic leaders' conceptions of research steering, *Higher Education*, doi:10.1007/s10734-013-9653-5
- Porac, J., Thomas, H. & Baden-Fuller, C. (1989). Competitive Groups as Cognitive Communities: the Case of Scottish Knitwear Manufacturers. *Journal of Management Studies*, 26, 397-414.
- Ring, P. S., & Van de Ven, A.H. (1989). Legal and managerial dimensions of transactions. In A. H. Van de Ven, H. Angle & M. S. Poole (eds.), *Research on the Management of Innovation: The Minnesota Studies* (pp. 171-192). New York: Ballinger/Harper Row.
- Rouleau, L. (2005). Micro-Practices of Strategic Sensemaking and Sensegiving: How Middle Managers Interpret and Sell Change Every Day. *Journal of Management Studies*, 42(7), 1413-1441.

- Scott, W.R. (1995). *Institutions and Organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Smerek, R.E. (2011). Sensemaking and Sensegiving: An Exploratory Study of the Simultaneous “Being and Learning” of New College and University Presidents. *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies*, 18(1), 80-94.
- Stensaker, B., Enders, J., & de Boer, H. (2007). Comparative analysis. The extent and impact of higher education governance reform across Europe. Enschede: CHEPS, NIFU STEP, CHE, ESMU.
- Weick, K.E. (1993). Collapse of sensemaking in organizations: The Mann Gulch Disaster. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 38, 628-652.
- Weick, K.E. (1995). *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Weick, K. E., Sutcliffe, K. & Obstfeld, D. (2005). Organizing and the Process of Sensemaking. *Organization Science*, 16(4), 409-421.





Chapter 6:  
Making Sense of Management:  
A study of Department Heads'  
Sensemaking Processes  
in a Changing Environment

Published in: *Resilient Universities: Confronting challenges in a Changing World*, edited by Jan Erik Karlsen and Rosalind Pritchard, Oxford: Peter Lang, pp. 191-211

LISE DEGN

## 7 Making Sense of Management: A Study of Department Heads' Sensemaking Processes in a Changing Environment

### Introduction

With the growing political attention to and discursive constructions of *the knowledge economy*, the universities are often highlighted in public debate as important providers of technological innovation and of a highly skilled labour force as vital instruments for societies in the ever more competitive global economy. This has, over the past decades, led to many attempts to define once and for all what the university *really* is, how it should be run, and indeed what its purpose is (Habermas, 1987; Nowotny et al., 2001; Gibbons et al., 1994; Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 1997). A particular area of debate has been the management issue – how is a university most efficiently managed, and is it possible or even relevant to speak of efficiency when referring to universities?

The renewed interest in the universities as players in the knowledge economy has also brought a wave of higher education reforms in Europe, where most, if not all, European universities have been subject to some type of reform aimed at strengthening institutional management. The reforms have typically contained elements of professionalization and a strengthening of institutional leadership, e.g. via the introduction of governing or supervisory boards with varying amounts of formal power. These boards range from being the highest authority in higher education institutions (Denmark) to being optional, advisory units (The Netherlands). Other general reform trends include increased focus on performance-based funding, increased

institutional autonomy and accountability, as well as the implementation of elaborated quality assurance mechanisms (de Boer and File, 2009: 14). This also means that managers at all levels at universities have been thrust into a maelstrom of ideas, most of which question their role and legitimacy.

Naturally these changes have attracted the attention of scholars across Europe – as well as the rest of the world – and a large amount of literature on the governance and management of higher education has emerged over the past decades (e.g. Amaral et al., 2002; Neave and Van Vught, 1991; Maassen, 2006; Ferlie et al., 2008); the changing identities of academics and university managers also attract scholarly attention (e.g. MacFarlane, 2011; Deem, 2006; Henkel, 2000; Whitchurch, 2008). It is the intention of the present study to build on this body of research by contributing a national case study which it is hoped will yield interesting insights into the workings of a national higher education reform process.

Denmark stands out as an interesting case, as the policy initiatives concerning higher education institutions have gone from being relatively moderate in what could be termed the initial wave of higher education reforms in the 1970s and 1980s (Stensaker et al., 2007; Eurydice, 2000), to implementing quite far-reaching governance and management reforms in the 2000s – particularly exemplified by the Danish University Act of 2003. This reform introduced significant breaks with the academic tradition of self-organization and self-management, e.g. by abolishing the collegiate management principle, where Rector, Deans and Department Heads were elected among their peers, substituting it with a more professionalized employment principle, where the board appoints a Rector, who appoints the Deans etc. (Aagaard and Mejlgaard, 2012). As in many other European countries, the reforms were greeted by a powerful defence of the traditional idea of *academic management*, emphasizing values such as democracy, collegiality, freedom etc, mainly stemming from the academic staff at the universities.

In the crossfire between these strong normative beliefs and the demands for change, we find the Department Heads. They operate in the intersection between politics and production and are at the same time, at least in Denmark, faced with the task of handling the balance between roles as managers, and as academic researchers, as they are required to have a

distinctive academic career behind them to be considered for the job as Department Head. These *production room* managers are thus responsible for the implementation of change at the department level while at the same time handling their own changing role. They are in other words both *changers* and *changees*, and are required to make sense of the situation both to themselves and to the academic and administrative staff that they lead. And it is exactly this *sensemaking process* which is the focal point of the present chapter.

### Reforms and Ideas as Catalysts of Sensemaking

Sensemaking is a term which has become increasingly mainstream – both in scholarly circles amongst organization theorists and students, but also in everyday life and discourse: how often does one stop and say (or think): ‘let me just make sense of what you are telling me.’ The reason for this is that there is an increasing feeling of complexity in modern society, and thus an increasing need for complexity reduction at both individual and collective level. In other words there are too many or excessively conflicting inputs to a process which leads to a need for selection and segregation of inputs which are manageable to the individual or the organization.

The basic assumption of this paper is that higher education reforms can be seen as catalysts of sensemaking as they introduce new ideas into an existing, highly institutionalized network of ideas, thus disrupting a situation which has already been assigned meaning. Sensemaking as a theoretical term (cf. Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005) describes the process whereby people attempt to create meaning in the disrupted context by extracting specific cues and placing them in an order that is sensible to them: turning circumstances into a situation in which it is possible to act sensibly. The *output* of sensemaking is thereby the creation of action – or indeed a meaningful situation in which action is possible. As Karl E. Weick, one of the founding fathers of sensemaking theory (Weick et al., 2005: 415)

puts it: sensemaking is not about finding the true meaning and thus the true course of action, but about the ‘continued redrafting of an emerging story so that it becomes more comprehensive, incorporates more of the observed data, and is more resilient in the face of criticism.’ Sensemaking can thereby be seen as an antecedent to decision making, as it creates a meaningful story and establishes premises upon which decisions can be made. ‘Sensemaking to determine the extent of agreement on preferences and cause-effect relations is a precondition of decision strategies’ (Weick, 1995: 112). The sensemaking processes of Department Heads thus do not only satisfy their individual need for meaning, but also pertain to the governance structures of the organization, as they contribute to the construction of ‘third order controls’, i.e. the premises on which future decisions can be made and the possible directions of future sensemaking processes (Weick, 1995).

The sensemaking process is ‘strongly influenced by cognitive frameworks in the form of institutional systems, routines and scripts’ (Mills, 2003: 55), but the disturbing element(s) however also play a significant role in the creation of meaning. This highlights the need to look at both new disrupting ideas, like reform impulses, and older institutionalizing ideas, e.g. university culture, but also calls for a framework sensitive to both continuity and change. To this end, we shall introduce a relatively new branch of institutionalism, aptly named ideational institutionalism, and discuss how it – in combination with the sensemaking perspective – offers an explanatory framework which is very suited for studies of change in higher education.

The basic tenet of ideational institutionalism is that ideas matter because they: ‘shape how we understand political problems, give definition to our goals and strategies, and are the currency we use to communicate about politics. By giving definition to our values and preferences, ideas provide us with interpretive frameworks that make us see some facts as important and others as less so’ (Béland and Cox, 2011: 3). Ideas – understood as normative and causal beliefs – work as impulses that affect and inspire our ongoing sensemaking processes by offering various lenses through which actors can view and construct their preferences and understandings of their environment. Ideas are therefore important to study because they act as

both restricting and transformational impulses (or cues in a sensemaking terminology). Consequently ideas about higher education shape the way I view myself as a researcher and as an actor within the academic system: they propose goals and legitimize or favour certain strategies to attain these goals. They make it possible for me to be understood by my peers and indeed allow me to identify who my peers are.

Two distinct dimensions of the ideational framework deserve a bit more attention, as they indicate how the approach distinguishes itself from related approaches, and also how it relates and contributes to the sensemaking perspective.

Firstly, a vital assumption, which shapes the theoretical understanding of the present study, is that ideas and institutions are analytically distinct. Béland and Cox (2011: 9) describe this distinction by proposing that: ‘... ideas are the foundation of institutions. As ideas give rise to people’s actions and as those actions form routines, the results are social institutions.’ Ideas are thus embedded in institutions, and the relationship between the two is seen as a dynamic and mutually constitutive one (Campbell, 2004), where they act both as restricting structures and as enabling constructs (Schmidt, 2011). It is exactly this conceptualization that distinguished ideational institutionalism from historical institutionalism, for example, where institutions are viewed as deterministic. This view implies that historical institutionalism struggles to explain change in the absence of exogenous shocks (Campbell, 2010).

Ideas, as opposed to institutions, are thereby seen as dynamic in the sense that they are not stable and delimited entities, but subject to change as they are re-coupled with other ideas in sensemaking processes. This leads to the second assumption, namely that ideas are always part of a larger ideational network. Following Carstensen (2010: 850), it is argued that ideas connect to other ideas, drawing meaning from them and revitalizing them with new meaning, much like words in a sentence. However an idea is not necessarily exclusively connected to one network, but might lend itself to several networks, thus offering several different translations. An example, highly relevant in a higher education policy perspective, is that the idea of autonomy can be connected to several different idea-networks, e.g. a *new public management* network, where autonomy is connected with ideas of

efficiency, marketization and competition and thereby becomes a matter of institutional accountability. On the other hand, autonomy can also be connected with ideas of academic freedom, collegiate management and *Bildung*: ideas that form what could be termed the *Republic of Science*-idea network (Polanyi, 1962). Here autonomy becomes a matter of independence from outside interference.

These different translations (Czarniawska-Joerges and Sevón, 2005) are in the present framework seen as sensemaking processes. The concept of sensemaking forms the bridge between ideational institutionalism and the individual actors, as it describes how ideas, for instance about management in higher education, are translated and reshaped by authoring actors who are co-creators of their own environment. Ideational institutionalism has thus far been primarily concerned with broad policy analyses, e.g. Berman's study of Social Democratic movements in Sweden and Germany, highlighting how different ideas lead to different political choices in the two countries, in spite of the common ideological basis (Berman, 2001), and Marc Blyth's analysis of the economic ideas of the twentieth century and how these ideas make institutional change possible (Blyth, 1999).

Sensemaking as a theoretical concept thus lends a helping hand to ideational institutionalism by offering a series of tools with which it is possible to analyse the way organizations and their members handle the actual translation of ideas. The extended definition of the term offered by Weick (2005: 409) is that: 'Viewed as a significant process of organizing, sensemaking unfolds as a sequence in which people concerned with identity in the social context of other actors engage ongoing circumstances from which they extract cues and make plausible sense retrospectively, while enacting more or less order into those ongoing circumstances'. This definition holds the vital characteristics of sensemaking – some of which are mainly descriptive, while others are more applicable in an analysis of sensemaking in organizations.

Firstly, sensemaking is understood as an *ongoing, retrospective* and *social* process concerned with *plausibility* rather than accuracy. This means that sensemaking is considered to be a continuous process with no discernible beginning or end. Actors are continuously exposed to the flux of impulses, actions and events, which prompts new sensemaking efforts. That

sensemaking is retrospective means that an event is not discovered to be meaningful per se – the meaning is created by looking backwards in time and connecting it with other events. Even though this gives the impression of a strictly cognitive and individual process, a vital characteristic of sensemaking is that it always plays out in a social space. Inspired by social psychology, Weick (1995: 39) reminds us that all sensemaking processes are performed in the imagined or actual presence of others. It is therefore not only the scripts, ideas and mental models of the sensemakers themselves that are taken into account, but also the imagined or experienced scripts, ideas and mental models of others. This also means that the primary goal of sensemaking is not accuracy but plausibility, as it is the most direct route to further action: ‘Because “objects” have multiple meanings and significance, it is more crucial to get some interpretation to start with than to postpone action until “the” interpretation surfaces’ (Weick, 1995: 57).

Secondly sensemaking is about – and can be analysed by looking at – how actors *construct identities, extract cues* and *enact them* back into their environment. A vital component of sensemaking processes is thereby identity construction which entails regarding the sensemaker as ‘an ongoing puzzle undergoing continual redefinition, coincident with presenting some self to others and trying to decide which self is appropriate’ (Weick, 1995: 20). It is thereby important to look at which self (e.g. academic, manager, strategist, administrator, victim etc.) is used as a frame of reference in the sensemaking process, as this influences which cues are deemed relevant, and extracted from a continuing flux of ideas, events and impulses (Weick et al., 2005). When cues have been extracted, they are enacted back into the world, to make the situation more sensible (Weick et al., 2005: 410).

In this way sensemaking is about *choosing* which cues are to be noticed and dealt with, and thereafter organizing these elements, e.g. by creating categories, and labelling them. Within the present context, Department Heads can create identifiable categories (the good university manager) by extracting cues from the external impulses and ideas (the need for strategic abilities), internal culture (the intangible product of the universities) and their own background (their academic interest in management and organization).



A final comment on the sensemaking framework relates to the distinction between individual and organizational sensemaking processes. The two levels of sensemaking within this framework are seen as inextricably linked, because individual sensemaking is both influenced by and influential on the collective, organizational sense of *self*. The Department Heads of this study interact with employees, other managers, stakeholders etc., in organizational activities, wherein the sense that they are continually making is turned into action, e.g. the formulation of strategic documents, discussions about departmental issues etc. In other words, when the individual sensemaking processes affect management practice, this shapes the organization, both through the actions that ensue, but also through the premises that are adopted (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005).

### *The Study*

The Danish university system was, as mentioned in the introduction, significantly transformed in 2003 by way of a large scale reform of both the institutions themselves, i.e. the organization, management and legal status, and later in 2007 of the entire sector via extensive mergers. The Danish universities went from being institutions of state to being self-owning institutions with independent budget responsibilities and professional governance structures. The biggest changes were the transition from the collegiate management system to an appointed hierarchy of managers, and the replacement of the University Senate with a board consisting mostly of external members (Folketinget, 2003). In 2007 this reform was followed by large scale mergers where universities amalgamated with each other and with governmental research institutions, now forming a university landscape of eight universities, as opposed to the previous twenty-five research institutions.

Of these eight I have chosen to zoom in on two, quite different, representatives. One, Aarhus University, is what might be called a traditional, Mode 1 university which has however recently initiated a very comprehensive transformation process affecting both the organization and its strategic goals. The other, Aalborg University, is a newer establishment,

founded in 1974, with the explicit aim of advancing problem- and project-based learning and a very strong focus on interdisciplinarity in research, i.e. more a Mode 2 oriented institution. The present study is based on sixteen semi-structured interviews with current and previous Department Heads from the two selected universities.<sup>1</sup> The Department Heads are distributed among the fields of natural science, social science and the humanities, and were selected with three criteria in mind: department size, experience as a Department Head, and an assessment of the degree of tradition characterizing the discipline of the department in question. The case-universities and the respondents were chosen to obtain a high degree of variation and thus an understanding of how (if at all) different circumstances affect the sensemaking processes.

When looking at sensemaking processes the basic premise that no *real truth* is out there cannot be sufficiently stressed – there is no true construction, and thus no true reading and interpretation of the data. Sense is made through language and the respondents therefore make sense while talking. The interviews themselves are a part of the process which influences the way sense is made, and the topics that I bring into this process also have an effect. As Weick puts it, sensemaking ‘like all organizing occurs amidst a stream of *potential* antecedents and consequences’ (Weick et al., 2005: 411, emphasis in original).

## Making Sense of Management

The basic assumption was, as mentioned, that a constant flow of ideas of change would be a significant driver for sensemaking processes, which also quickly became apparent – the feeling of a disruption or disturbance is evident in all the interviews. The initial step in any sensemaking process

1 The Danish university sector consists of eight universities with a total of approximately 164 departments.

would then, according to Weick, be the formulation of a problem that guides behaviour and a goal towards which one can work. This 'bracketing' or 'noticing' (Weick et al., 2005) is a way of reducing the complexity of a problem-filled situation.

The study revealed that two very different sensemaking processes were at work, constructing two different narratives about the problems that are relevant to deal with, the relations that are affected by these problems and the actions necessary to solve them:

...it is possible that when they looked at the surface of it all, of course there were department councils and academic councils and students and Senates and all these things, and there were fancy Minutes and there were democratic processes, but it just so happens that it wasn't there— at least not always – that the decisions were made. They were made in completely informal fora by those who had seized power...<sup>2</sup>

...in the old system, which was a democratic organ, [...] we sat around these tables and voted on everything [...] right to each other's faces. What came before such a vote? [...] There were fierce discussions and alliances and screenings [...] so that when you came to the meeting it was simply a formality. [...] [But] the democratic bodies took a serious blow [already] in '93. And [...] at that time we sat in rooms like this and assured each other that they might have passed a new law, but that was not going to cost us our democratic decision-making structure. And that [the loss of the democratic decision-making structure] was exactly what happened.

These quotes illustrate how the same cue can be assigned completely different values: how the past can be construed as both negative and positive, depending on the sensemaking strategy, naturally affecting how appropriate action and legitimate goals are constructed. In the first quote we see how the democratic processes of the previous university management system are valued negatively: a feint used to cover up the 'actual' decision making processes taking place behind the curtain. The same situation is described in the second quote, only now with a positive valuation, emphasizing the active debate culture of the past.

2 All quotes in this section have been translated by the author.

We thus see the contours of two different strategies underlying the sensemaking processes, both highly influenced by the interpersonal and group relations as well as by new and older ideas.

The first strategy is clearly aimed at retaining as much as possible from the previous situation, which would enable the participants to resume the interrupted activity, i.e. maintain status quo or at least continue on the existing path – one might label this *the preserving strategy* as it revolves around a positive valuation of the past, and the preservation of the arm's length relation between academia and the political system/society. The Department Heads using this strategy tend to construct change as negative and disaffirming by evoking existing ideas of democracy, traditional university culture and academic autonomy. The past is viewed in a positive light which would naturally entail a negative attitude towards change – why fix it, if it is not broken? Here the extracted meaning is one of (unwarranted) lack of trust from the surrounding society, and thus a devaluation of the work that was being done.

...It is not that there isn't a legitimate claim from society to gain insight into what we are doing, but it is also a question of: if you want us to perform a task, then rely on us to do so [...] And that's where I don't think the politicians show us the trust that we could wish for. And after all, they give us a lot of money, and you don't do that if you don't trust people to do the job.

The reform and the ensuing professionalization of the management structure in Denmark were heavily influenced by an idea of decision making authority. This was constructed as a necessary item in the management-toolbox in order to enable the managers to make executive decisions and avoid the democratic trap outlined above, where decisions were contingent on a very long and opaque negotiation process. In the *preserving* narrative of sensemaking, the use of this authority however is seen as an admission of failure: if you make decisions against the will of the academic staff, you are a poor manager – you will have lost. One Department Head describes a situation which illustrates this point quite vividly:

You would be a strange manager to launch something against the wishes of your staff, but in principle you have the ability to do it. But then I doubt that you would have a constructive, positive organisation [...]. I remember that we were designing

a course (X), and there was debate about which of two very different elements (Y) to use, where the majority said: let's use this one, because that is what's used in the industry, and the ones who were doing the course said: we would like to try this [...]. Then the 'grand old men' of the department said that it certainly would be a little strange if we insist upon something that contradicts the ones who are doing the job. So they [the ones who were running the course] were allowed to run it the way they wanted. It turned out to be wrong, but then again, we have to make things work, we have to move forward in a constructive way.

This quote also tells the story of the relationship with the academic staff, and highlights the value ascribed to this relationship. In many ways it is described as a parent-child relation, where the Department Head claims the role of the supervising and protecting parent, and the academics are the developing prodigies. The role of management is in this way constructed as protecting and safeguarding academic production from external threats (such as reform impulses). These are also to some extent linked to top-level management, whose expectations are construed as more 'raw' and performance-oriented than previously.

The second strategy that emerges from the sensemaking processes studied here might be labelled *the evolving strategy*, and tends to aim more towards change, connecting itself to an ongoing story about the need for change in university. The past is viewed as problematic and thus change is inevitable and possibly even overdue.

...Danish universities have to accept that there is a different competitive pressure on almost all dimensions than there was twenty-thirty years ago and we cannot keep doing things the same way.

The expectations that are believed to exist in society are ones of transparency and relevance, which are assigned positive value. The Department Heads who employ this strategy construct the changes in organization and management structure as mainly positive and affirming by connecting it to already existing ideas about the development of higher education: their subject, their department, the academic community in general and often also themselves:

...there was also in some way a greater [...] awareness of the meaning of the collective among the employees [...] [and] the idea that [...] this is not just a collection of one-man businesses that just happen to be working within the scope of a department, but that we actually have some things in common [...], and that we benefit from some common services, [...] which demands co-ordination and pooling of resources.

The problem constructed here is that 'the old system' had built-in shortcomings which prevented the organization from functioning properly. It is clear that sensemaking here draws meaning from the new idea of professionalized management, as cues like enhanced decision making authority are constructed as legitimate means towards the goal of good academic production. This tool is thus a positive aid, however naturally contingent upon sensible communication with the employees.

Being an elected manager is one thing, being an appointed one is another. An elected manager is kind of responsible to the ones that have elected him/her, and will sometimes do something that can be un-conducive to reaching the goals that are set. An elected manager will not lock horns with people as much, an elected manager will not touch upon the sore spots, but an appointed one is obliged to do whatever it takes, including talking to people about their strengths and weaknesses [...] to get to where we are going.

The *evolving strategy* in general draws meaning from newer ideas of entrepreneurialism, dynamic capacities and strategy, thus decision making authority becomes a legitimate tool in management. The relationship between manager and academic staff is also articulated as more professionalized and somewhat distanced, as the key objective of management is developing and guiding rather than preserving. The role of management is to make sure that 'we get where we are going' and indeed to *define* where we are going. The study thus shows that there are very different ways of handling change impulses – there are different stories that can be told depending on the valuation and categorization of the cues that are extracted. However the two strategies have one very central thing in common, namely when it comes to defining the concept of management.

The interesting thing is that there is a general tendency to distance oneself from the concept of steering and *hard* management – both sense-making strategies emphasize that it is a very important characteristic to be

a *soft*, empathic leader. A clear distinction is drawn between *management* and *university management*, which also lends legitimacy to the refusal of the concept of external managers. Only one of the Department Heads embraces the idea that managers from other sectors could become managers in the university, and even this is simply viewed as the lesser of several evils:

...it would be hard if it wasn't the right person, but they exist too. And isn't it better to try and find such a person, than to take a researcher who doesn't really want to do it, or worse: to take a semi-poor researcher, who is also a semi-poor manager, who then says: 'at least now I have a justification in life.'

A central part of both strategies thus seems to be negative categorization and labelling, i.e. I am not that kind of manager, university is not that kind of organization etc. In other words both strategies produce a category – a (*hard*) *manager* – against which one defines oneself. This creates a new social category, *the university manager*, and enhances the social bond to the institution. This indicates that the university as an institution is in both strategies seen as the primary reference group, i.e. the group whose perspective provides the most salient frames (Shibutani, 1955), and thereby a very powerful influence on sensemaking processes. The two strategies however differ in the way that this conceptualization is used to facilitate action.

The evolving strategy uses the social identification as a management tool by constructing it as a necessity in order to 'get where we are going', given that it produces legitimacy among the academic staff. In other words, if you are a *hard manager* (i.e. constructed as a private sector-style manager) you will lose the support of the academic staff, and thus not be able to act. This indicates a strategic use of reference group. The preserving strategy also emphasizes the legitimacy reasons for *soft management* but tends to connect it more to the manager's own sense of self and to older ideas of collegial management and classical university thinking, indicating a more *emotional* use of reference group.

*Consequences for Management Practice?*

The two sensemaking strategies and the narratives they produce are clearly linked to the self-perception of the Department Heads. The way they view themselves, the self that they use as a frame of reference, obviously influences which strategy they employ, and further frames their practice as managers. Even though the borders are fuzzy it is possible to extract three distinct discursive constructions of the role as Department Head from the descriptions – each with a different set of values, tools and legitimate actions ascribed to it, and each stemming from the sensemaking strategies described above.

## SHIELDERS

This type of Department Head employs *the preserving strategy* and thus perceives external change impulses as disruptive, unwarranted and often unreasonable. This construction offers legitimacy to a continuation of the existing practice to the highest degree possible. These Heads view their role as an absorber of change, thus shielding the ‘real’ workers from these change impulses. There is a tendency to see the job as an obligation and to identify primarily with the academic staff. The Department Heads adopting this role tend towards decoupling talk from action, e.g. constructing strategies by describing ongoing activities as future strategic priorities.

## CO-ORDINATORS

The co-ordinator is a somewhat ‘schizophrenic’ type, as both strategies are applied in the sensemaking process. Most often this type ascribes a positive value to the past, but also speaks positively about many of the ongoing change processes. Co-ordinators tend to articulate a conflict-ridden view on loyalty, as they are trying to balance being loyal to the employer (Dean, Rector, board etc.) versus being loyal to the employees (academic staff). The primary difference between the co-ordinator and the shielder is the action pattern associated with the role. Where the shielder was primarily a passive absorber of change, the co-ordinator assumes a more active



mediating and conveying role, attempting to translate change impulses in a preserving direction. The appropriate action pattern for this type of Department Head is one of subtle guidance.

#### AGENDA SETTERS

Agenda setter types use *the evolving strategy* in their sensemaking process and thus draw meaning from many of the ideas of change that emerge in the higher education idea network at the moment. The agenda setter describes a mainly positive view on university management, and a clear ambition for the department or academic field. This type of Department Head is one that initiates change of his/her own accord, and thus assumes a much more active role in the development and transformation of ideas and impulses. This type also describes a will to manage and to pursue the job actively.

### Conclusions and Implications

In the Danish case it becomes clear that a (surprisingly) large number of the Department Heads describe themselves as what I have called shielders or co-ordinators: indeed, thirteen of the sixteen respondents can be said to fit these categories. Interestingly, it seems that the way they view themselves as managers is connected to their experience as Department Heads – and not to their organizational affiliation or to their disciplinary background (humanities, social or natural sciences). The more experienced Department Heads tend to use the preserving strategy, and describe themselves in shielder and/or co-ordinator terms, and more recently appointed Department Heads can more often be seen as agenda setters, using the evolving sensemaking strategy.

This indicates that ideas about strategic management, professionalization and entrepreneurialism are having a hard time finding their way into the idea-networks that the Department Heads employ when making sense of their own role, and that old and institutionalized ideas about

management and the university – illustrated by the conceptualization of management described above – still have significant impact. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that more experienced Department Heads, who have been ‘in the system’ longer, tend to adhere more to the highly institutionalized ideas of university governance structures, and may disregard the new ideas about strategic, professionalized university management as irrelevant, while Department Heads who do not have experience with the previous structures have a more difficult time with this.

This is also mirrored in the fact that even though many Department Heads describe joy and excitement when speaking of their job – primarily the agenda setters and the co-ordinators – this is often done with a touch of ambivalence, as if it is not legitimate to connect academia to management. This concern with legitimacy reflects the social aspect of sensemaking, as sense is clearly constructed with an audience in mind. The study indicates that the horizontal and vertical relations are also influential factors in the extraction of cues, and often it is the expectations and images of others that assist the sensemaking. This means that the Department Heads construct certain expectations that they believe others to have, either the expectations of academic and administrative staff or the expectations of Deans, Rectors, society or the political system, and that these expectations guide the sensemaking processes. Another social aspect which has emerged from the study is that the shielder types – and to some extent the co-ordinator types – identify much more with the academic staff than with their own role as leader and therefore experience internal conflict when it comes to loyalty and the use of authority. The agenda setter types emphasize their own expectations as important, which could be seen as a sign that this type of Department Head identifies more with the role as manager, and thus distances him/herself from the previous role as a researcher.

In other words, there are many forces at work when looking at how new impulses affect sensemaking and management practice in universities. In the present study I have attempted to show how the sensemaking processes of Department Heads are influenced by various ideas and institutions that simultaneously restrain and enable new enactments and identity constructions. The Department Heads do struggle with restricting structures, imagined and experienced expectations and institutionalized idea networks,

but as the analysis has shown they still find room to manoeuvre, and to construct their own role and space in the organization. This is exemplified by the considerable difference between the shielder-type manager and the agenda setter-type manager.

These findings could also prove interesting when looking at the *organizational identity constructions*, i.e. 'how organizational members perceive and understand "who we are" and/or "what we stand for" as an organization' (Hatch and Schultz, 2000: 15). It is clear that the sensemaking processes of the Department Heads also speak to this institutional-level understanding of what the purpose and values of the university are – and question if the university is even the primary source of identification. Looking at the results of the present study, there are indications that typology could also prove a relevant framework when looking at the construction of organizational identity. As mentioned above, the shielders use academic conceptualizations to make sense of new ideas and disturbances, and there are indications that they feel more closely connected to the academic community than to the specific organization for which they work. This would be well in line with Rosemary Deem's (2004) observation: 'As a number of commentators have noted, in the 1970s (Moodie and Eustace, 1974), in the 1980s (Jarratt, 1985) and more recently (Henkel, 2000), academic loyalty tends to be oriented towards the basic academic unit and subject or discipline, not the interests of the university as a whole', but as the typology shows, it is also only part of the story. The agenda setters, and to some extent the co-ordinators, seem to have a closer bond to the organization as such, but still adhere to what could be termed an institutional identity, namely the *university manager* described above. More in-depth studies of these identification issues are however needed to illuminate these complex workings.

The findings that are summarized above certainly all speak to the resilience of the ideas surrounding higher education institutions – and the impact that this resilience has on the managers attempting to make sense of the changing environment. The manager typology and the common construction of *the university manager* illustrate that the ideas are indeed flexible and broad enough to encompass even somewhat antagonistic constructions of identity, without losing common ground. In other words, they bend and they flex to maintain a meaningful sense of self – even in the face of very challenging and changing environments.

## References

- Aagaard, K., and Mejlgaard, N. (eds) (2012). *Dansk forskningspolitik efter årtusindskiftet* (Danish research policy in the new millennium). Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag.
- Amaral, A., Meek, L., and Larsen, I.M. (eds) (2002). *The Higher Education Managerial Revolution?* Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Béland, D., and Cox, R.H. (2011). *Ideas and Politics in Social Science Research Ideas and Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Berman, S. (2010). 'Ideology, History, and Politics'. In D. Béland, and R.H. Cox (eds), *Ideas and Politics in Social Science Research*, pp. 105–126. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Blyth, M. (1999). *Great Transformation: Economic Ideas and Political Change in the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Columbia University.
- Campbell, J.L. (2004). *Institutional Change and Globalization*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Campbell, J.L. (2010). 'Institutional Reproduction and Change'. In G. Morgan, J.L. Campbell, C. Crouch, O.K. Pedersen, and R. Whitley (eds), *Oxford Handbook of Comparative Institutional Analysis*, pp. 87–115. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Carstensen, M.B. (2010). 'The Nature of Ideas, and Why Political Scientists Should Care: Analysing the Danish Jobcentre Reform from an Ideational Perspective', *Political Studies*, 58, 847–865.
- Czarniawska-Joerges, B., and Sevón, G. (2005). *Global Ideas: How Ideas, Objects and Practices Travel in a Global Economy*. Frederiksberg: Liber & Copenhagen Business School Press.
- Deem, R. (2004). 'The Knowledge Worker, the Manager-Academic and the Contemporary UK University: New and Old Forms of Public Management?', *Financial Accountability & Management*, 20 (2), 107–128.
- de Boer, H., and File, J. (2009). *Higher Education Governance Reforms across Europe* (MODERN project). Brussels: ESMU.
- Deem, R. (2006). 'Changing Research Perspectives on the Management of Higher Education: Can Research Permeate the Activities of Manager-Academics?', *Higher Education Quarterly*, 60 (3), 203–228.
- Etzkowitz, H., and Leydesdorff, L. (1997). *Universities and the Global Knowledge Economy: a Triple Helix of Academy-Industry-Government Relations*. London: Pinter.
- Eurydice (2000). *Two Decades of Reform in Higher Education in Europe: 1980 onwards*. European Commission (DG Education and Culture) <<http://www.ihep.org/assets/files/gcfp-files/TWODECADESREFORM.pdf>> accessed 27 April 2013.

- Ferlie, E., Musselin, C., and Andresani, G. (2008). 'The Steering of Higher Education Systems: a Public Management Perspective', *Higher Education*, 56 (3), 325–348.
- Folketinget (2003). *Forslag til Lov om universiteter* (Proposal for Law on Universities, The University Act). Copenhagen: The Danish Parliament. <www.retsinformation.dk/Forms/R0710.aspx?id=100418> (in Danish) accessed 27 April 2013.
- Gibbons, M., Limoges, C., Nowotny, H., Schwartzman, S., Scott, P., and Trow, M. (1994). *The New Production of Knowledge – the Dynamics of Science And Research in Contemporary Societies*. London: Sage Publications.
- Habermas, J. (1987). 'The Idea of the University: Learning Processes', *New German Critique*, 41, Special Issue on the Critiques of the Enlightenment (Spring–Summer, 1987), 3–22.
- Hatch, M.J., and Schultz, M. (2000). 'Scaling the Tower of Babel: Relational Differences between Identity, Image, and Culture in Organizations'. In M. Schultz, M., J. Hatch, and M.H. Larsen (eds), *The Expressive Organization: Linking Identity, Reputation, and Corporate Brand*, pp. 13–35. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Henkel, M. (2000). *Academic Identities and Policy Change in Higher Education*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Maassen, P. (2006). *The Modernisation of European Higher Education. A Multi Level Analysis*. Paper presented at the Directors General for Higher Education Meeting. Helsinki, 19–20 October 2006.
- Macfarlane, B. (2011). 'The Morphing of Academic Practice: Unbundling and the Rise of the Para-Academic', *Higher Education Quarterly*, 65 (1), 59–73.
- Mills, J.H. (2003). *Making Sense of Organizational Change*. New York: Routledge.
- Neave, G., and Van Vught, F. (eds) (1991). *Prometheus Bound: The Changing Relationships Between Government and Higher Education*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Nowotny, H., Scott, P., and Gibbons, M. (2001). *Re-Thinking Science: Knowledge and the Public in an Age of Uncertainty*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Polanyi, M. (1962). 'The Republic of Science: its Political and Economic Theory', *Minerva*, 1 (1), 54–73.
- Schmidt, V.A. (2010). 'Reconciling Ideas and Institutions through Discursive Institutionalism'. In D. Béland, and R.H. Cox (eds), *Ideas and Politics in Social Science Research*, pp. 64–89. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Stensaker, B., Enders, J., and de Boer, H. (2007). *The Extent and Impact of Higher Education Governance Reform across Europe, Comparative Analysis and Executive Summary. Final Report to the Directorate-General for Education and Culture of the European Commission*. Enschede: CHEPS
- Tsoukas, H., and Chia, R. (2002). 'Organizational Becoming: Rethinking Organizational Change', *Organization Science*, 13 (5), 567–582.

- Weick, K.E. (1995). *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Weick, K.E., Sutcliffe, K., and Obstfeld, D. (2005). 'Organizing and the Process of Sensemaking', *Organization Science*, 16 (4), 409–421.
- Whitchurch, C. (2008). 'Shifting Identities and Blurring Boundaries: the Emergence of "Third Space Professionals" in UK Higher Education', *Higher Education Quarterly*, 62 (4), 376–395.

Chapter 7:  
Identity constructions and  
sensemaking in Higher Education –  
A case study of Danish Higher  
Education department heads

Article published in *Studies in Higher Education*

## Identity constructions and sensemaking in higher education – a case study of Danish higher education department heads

Lise Degn\*

*Danish Centre for Studies in Research and Research Policy, Department of Political Science and Government, School of Business and Social Sciences, Aarhus University, Bartholins allé 7, DK-8000 Aarhus C, Denmark*

Academic values and norms have as a consequence of the wave of European higher education reforms been put under pressure by the increasing expectations and demands of flexibility, entrepreneurialism and accountability. This article examines how these changes affect identity construction processes at department head level in the case of Danish universities, and how these processes influence management practice. The analysis shows how the structural demands, institutional scripts and values, as well as personal cognitive frames result in very different identity dilemmas for department heads. Three different stereotypical department head types are presented and the implications of the characteristics of these types are discussed.

**Keywords:** academic identity; academic management; management; institutional change; identity

### Introduction

Academic principles and values have, since the inception of higher education institutions (HEI), helped shape identities in academia and are still today held in high regard. They have however in recent decades been put under pressure by the increasing expectations and demands posed by the rise of the ‘knowledge society’ (Gornitzska and Maassen 2000; Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff 1997) and the subsequent reforms of the European higher education sector, highly influenced by ideas of flexibility, entrepreneurialism, accountability and what is increasingly known in academia as ‘new managerialism’ (Deem, Reed, and Hillyard 2007). These reforms have in many institutions led to the abolition of the traditional collegiate management structure and replaced it with a more professionalized system, with appointed, professional and in some cases external managers (Stensaker, Enders, and de Boer 2007).

The present paper examines how these changes and impulses affect identity construction processes at department head level in the case of Danish universities. The argument is that identity constructions – who we think we are – affect which action patterns we deem appropriate and thereby our conduct – what we do. Understanding how department heads construct their identity in the face of a changing environment will thus add to our understanding of how they act as managers and as organizational members, and thereby increase our awareness of how HEIs respond to change.

---

\*Email: [ld@cfa.au.dk](mailto:ld@cfa.au.dk)



The study builds on the work of Henkel (2005), De Boer, Goedegebuure and Meek (2010) and Deem, Reed, and Hillyard (2007), who all highlighted dilemmas and paradoxes inherent in the new HE governance structures, and their impact on managers and academics. The purpose of the present paper is to add to the growing understanding of how managers perceive themselves and their actions. While other studies of the middle management level of higher education management (e.g. Meek et al. 2010; Deem, Reed, and Hillyard 2007) have successfully investigated how both traditional norms and newer ideas of professionalized management exist side by side, the present study will contribute with a view on how seemingly conflicting norms and ideas affect the identity creation and maintenance of the higher education middle managers, and how this affects management practice.

### ***Higher education middle management***

Higher education (HE) middle management has recently become an area of increasing interest in HE studies (e.g. Meek et al. 2010), and particularly the role of the manager-academic (e.g. Deem 2004) has attracted a growing amount of attention in the wake of the reforms described above. However this group of managers is still far from being at the top of the list of research subjects, and as De Boer, Goedegebuure and Meek (2010, 230) point out, ‘remarkably little is known about how these “new generation” middle managers go about their tasks’, despite their obviously critical position in the managerial hierarchy of the new and changing universities. Middle managers in universities are faced with a number of challenges, as they are expected to maintain academic legitimacy while acting strategically and politically both in the relation to top level management, and towards external stakeholders. A good case in point is the development in the Danish HE system, which has undergone major transformations, clearly influenced by new ideas about strategy and management.

In 2003 a major reform of the Danish universities was implemented, representing a significant break with the academic tradition of self-organization and self-management, e.g. by the establishment of a governing board with a majority of external stakeholders as the supreme authority of each university and by abolishing the collegiate management principle, substituting it with a more professionalized employment principle, where the board appointed a rector, who appointed the deans, etc. (Degn and Sørensen 2012). The department heads thus went from being elected by their peers to being appointed by their direct superior, i.e. the dean, while at same time being moved to the administrative job-category. With this change in status also came a vastly extended range of duties and responsibilities. The department heads are now equally responsible for the administrative, academic, strategic and personnel management of the, in some cases greatly enlarged, departments. The positions are fixed-term employments, typically for five years with a possibility of prolongation. However to obtain or maintain a high degree of legitimacy towards the academic staff the Danish department heads are also required by law to be established researchers, and in many universities they also have the option or a specific obligation to do research. These structural demands seem to be pulling the department heads in two opposite directions, when they on the one hand are expected to accept responsibility for a range of new, and very classical managerial tasks, while at the same time upholding some form of academic status.

These ambiguous demands can be seen as challenging the identity of department heads, and thus as drivers of sensemaking; processes wherein individuals or groups

(organizations) that are faced with complex circumstances or disruptions in their practice continually attempt to create meaning (Weick 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2005; Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991, Smircich and Stubbart 1985). By looking closer at these sensemaking processes, we hope to gain an enhanced understanding of how the complexity of the situation facing HE managers is handled – and how practice unfolds.

The present paper reports from the findings of a study of Danish department heads, conducted in 2011. Sixteen department heads from two Danish universities were interviewed, and initial analyses of the data material (Degn 2013), indicated that there were marked differences in the ‘sensemaking strategies,’ particularly in terms of valuation of the past (e.g. the past as an ideal, or as a hindrance), attitude towards change (e.g. change as a goal, or change as an obstacle), and role perceptions (e.g. descriptions of loyalty, or of identification). These differences led to a construction of a department head typology, which describes how three different strategies for sensemaking leads to different perceptions of self, and perceptions of appropriate action patters. These three department head types, termed *shielders*, *coordinators* and *agenda-setters*, are described in Table 1.

These stereotypical categories can be seen as a first step towards an enhanced understanding of how department heads handle ambiguous input, and which strategies they use to make sense of organizational change. It is important to note that the typology does not represent an attempt to group the respondents, but a development of stereotypes and thereby as a conceptual tool for understanding the different ways sense is made in HEIs.

As Table 1 demonstrates, two distinct strategies were identified in the narratives of the Danish department heads, which are being employed to make sense of the myriad of impulses that surround HE. One such strategy is termed the preserving strategy, as it aims at retaining as much of the past as possible in the sensemaking process. The other strategy – the evolving strategy – values the past negatively, thus legitimizing change. The three department head types – shielders, coordinators and agenda setters – use these strategies differently, which influences and is influenced by the way they perceive their role in the organization for which they work. The shielder type for example tends to use the preserving strategy when making sense, which legitimizes

Table 1. Typology of department heads – initial study.

	Shielders	Coordinators	Agenda setters
Attitude towards change – perception of role	<i>Absorbers of change</i> View change impulses as disruptive and attempt to protect employees from them by way of e.g. decoupling.	<i>Translators of change</i> View it as their job to translate and reshape change impulses in a preserving way, to ease implementation.	<i>Initiators of change</i> Actively formulate change initiatives and see them through. See their own main role as entrepreneur.
Sensemaking strategy	Preserving – values the past positively, and aims to retain as much of it as possible.	Preserving and evolving – depending on the situation.	Evolving – values the past negatively, thus legitimizing change.

a continuation of existing practice by way of a positive valuation of the past and a role perception as an absorber of change.

The present study digs deeper into the narratives of the Danish department heads and attempts to further refine the typology, by adding a more comprehensive perspective on how *identity constructions* play out within each category, and with what consequences for management practice.

### Identity construction as organizing – the sensemaking framework

Change within organizations may cause individuals to ask questions such as ‘who are we?’ or ‘how do we do things?’ The way in which individuals make sense of these questions impacts their understandings of their own identities and that of the organization. (Mills, Thurlow, and Mills 2010, 188)

As the quote above indicates, when the Danish department heads experience changing and ambiguous conditions and expectations, this will often trigger a need to make (new) sense of who they are, and how things are done within their organization. In order to understand and describe how this process plays out, the sensemaking perspective, especially as it is conceptualized by Weick (Weick 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2005) and Mills, Thurlow, and Mills (2010) offers a framework for analysis, which highlights and conceptualizes identity construction as a vital part of organizing, and thereby as a key element in organizational behavior.

Sensemaking can be understood as a process ‘in which people concerned with identity in the social context of other actors engage ongoing circumstances from which they extract cues and make plausible sense retrospectively, while enacting more or less order into those ongoing circumstances’ (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2005, 409), or stated differently, as a process of ‘creative authoring’ (Brown, Stacey, and Nandhakumar 2008, 1038), wherein individuals or groups faced with too many (ambiguous) or too few (uncertain) inputs, and possible interpretations of circumstances, create a plausible story, which helps them maintain a positive sense of self, by way of drawing creatively on their own memory (Coopey, Keegan, and Emler 1997). This concept of sensemaking has provided a useful framework for among both studies of how organizations (and members) act in crisis situations (Weick 1988, 1993), how change processes within organizations are shaped and reshaped by sensemaking and sensegiving processes (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991; Kezar 2013), how individuals (e.g. managers) make sense of new organizations or circumstances (Smerek 2011) as well as many other research areas.

A vital assumption in the descriptions above is that sensemaking is about ‘identity,’ and is thereby highly relevant to the present study of how department heads construct identity in the face of changing circumstances. The connection between identity construction and sensemaking is made clear by Coopey and colleagues as they describe how ‘individuals attempt to make sense of ambiguous stimuli in ways that respond to their own identity needs’ (Coopey, Keegan, and Emler 1997, 312). At the heart of this process three major motives are identified, namely the needs for self-enhancement, self-efficacy, and self-consistency (Weick 1995; Brown, Stacey, and Nandhakumar 2008; Erez and Earley 1993; Gecas 1982). Self-enhancement concerns the need to maintain a positive cognitive construction of self, namely the individuals’ tendency to ‘prefer and seek out positive information about themselves’ and to ‘selectively sample, interpret, and remember events that support positive self-concept’ (Erez and

Earley 1993, 28). Self-efficacy describes the need to feel and present oneself as efficacious and competent, and the fact that '(p)eople tend to avoid tasks and situations they believe exceed their capabilities. Efficacy judgments promote the choice of situations and tasks that have a high likelihood of success while eliminating tasks that exceed one's capabilities' (43). The final motive in the identity construction process is self-consistency – the need to feel some form of coherence and continuity in one's identity constructions: 'The sense of continuity and consistency helps individuals to connect events in their current social life to past experiences and to maintain a coherent view that enables them to operate effectively in the environment' (44).

This process of identity construction plays out in retrospect (Weick 1995). As Starbuck and Milliken (1988) point out: 'People seem to see past events as much more rationally ordered than current or future events, because retrospective sensemaking erases many of the causal sequences that complicate and obscure the present and future,' illustrating that the process of sensemaking is concerned with picking out elements from the past and connecting them in order to construct a story that makes the present and the future meaningful. This process – choosing a certain 'version of events,' e.g. by formulating an organizational strategy – also works by enacting the environment that the department heads need to act upon, i.e. extracting a set of problems and solutions by deeming them relevant and strategically important. As the department heads make sense, they thereby also produce sense. They author their own 'reality' and thus the 'reality' they project on to their environment – and the organization. In other words, who they think they are affects how they act as managers.

A final vital assumption relevant to the present study is that sensemaking processes are not solely cognitive processes, but play out in the actual or imagined presence of others (Weick 1995; Maitlis 2005). This entails that the way we think others see us and the values, norms and perceptions we believe others to value are all important influences on the individual sensemaking attempts. As Dutton and Dukerich (1991, 548) point out, '(i)ndividual's self-concepts and personal identities are formed and modified in part by how they believe others view the organization for which they work'. This is particularly true for universities and the academics working within them, as the global competition between universities and subsequent hierarchy is and has always been of great importance. This also means that 'an organization's rules, routines, symbols, and language will all have an impact on an individual's sensemaking activities and provide routines or scripts for appropriate conduct' (Mills, Thurlow, and Mills 2010, 185).

The sensemaking perspective thus offers a method of analysis, which emphasizes both agency and structure, by highlighting both the structuring nature of cognitive frames and organizational rules, routines, etc., but also the 'authoring actor,' i.e. the active and intentional enactment of the sensemaker.

### ***Central questions***

As sensemaking, and identity, is by definition a process, no analysis will be able to capture 'the result' of sensemaking or 'the true identity.' The purpose of the present paper is thus not to test hypotheses about which factors are more or less significant to identity construction, or indeed to arrive at causal explanations or general models. Following the example of Bleiklie and Kogan (2006, 6), the typology of department heads and the sensemaking framework is meant to provide 'a set of concepts in terms of which we may arrive at meaningful interpretations by identifying similarities

and differences between our cases. The next step in the analysis is then to try to identify factors that can explain patterns or regularities'. The goal is in this way to use the concepts from the sensemaking perspective to look for similarities and differences – and present these differences and similarities by way of the typology.

Firstly, focus will be on how the department heads handle the balance between 'being an academic' and 'being a manager'; who do they think they are? Following the theoretical framework, a vital part in a sensemaking (identity construction) process is to create a plausible story that makes sense to the notion of 'who we are' and thereby to their identity need. The analysis will therefore initially focus on illuminating the different ways department heads create a story that complies with the three motives in identity construction. The main question here is how the academic values and the identities that these values offer (Mills, Thurlow, and Mills 2010) are balanced against the identity cues offered by reform narratives and other change impulses.

Secondly, identity construction is influenced by the perception of the organization, both in terms of identity and image. A second focal point in the analysis is therefore on the social aspect of the sensemaking processes, and how the organization emerges in the narratives of the department heads. As the typology of department heads (Table 1) indicates, the three manager types have very different ways of perceiving *their role in the organization*, and it would thereby seem likely that the perceptions of how others view their organization would also differ across the categories.

Thirdly, the analysis focuses on how the identity constructions affect management practice, i.e. what do they do? This final section analyzes how the department heads move from the identity to action and establish and enact appropriate action patterns. This section thereby aims at investigating how the identity construction processes, examined in the initial sections of the analysis, impacts practice by making certain actions plausible and desirable.

### ***The study***

The ensuing analysis of identity construction processes is, as mentioned, based on narratives stemming from 16 qualitative interviews with department heads from two Danish universities. As mentioned, the sensemaking framework indicates that organizational scripts, routines and symbols may provide individual organization members with vital cues and frames for sensemaking. The respondents were therefore chosen from two different HEIs with distinct individual characteristics, in order to investigate differences in the way that identity construction processes play out in different organizational settings. Aarhus University is what one might call a traditional, mode 1 university, which has however recently initiated a very comprehensive transformation process which affects both the organization and goals of the organization. The second university, Aalborg University, is a newer construction, founded in 1974, with the explicit goal of advancing problem- and project-based learning and a very strong focus on interdisciplinarity in research, i.e. a more 'mode 2' oriented institution.

Following Deem (2004, 111), who notes that: '(a)s a number of commentators have noted [ ... ] academic loyalty tends to be oriented towards the basic academic unit and subject or discipline, not the interests of the university as a whole', academic discipline and department characteristics were also taken into consideration in the selection procedure. The department heads chosen for interviews are therefore evenly distributed among the fields of natural science, social science and the humanities, and have served as department heads for varying periods of time – factors that other studies

have shown to be important in identity construction processes (Deem, Reed, and Hill-yard 2007; Henkel 2000; Becher and Trowler 2001).

## **Empirical findings**

### ***'Who am I?'***

One of the key questions of the study was to investigate how the department head balances between the academic identity and the 'new' manager identity. The interviews showed that this balance was indeed hard to find, and when examining the three different manager types we find very different constructions of manager/academic identities.

One way is to completely assume the role of university manager – thus actively deselecting the academic researcher role, which can be said to be the case for the 'agenda setter type' department head. This choice becomes a part of the identity construction process by enhancing the sense of self-efficacy, i.e. by making the choice to concentrate on only one role, they feel more competent within that role, and indeed just making the decision enhances their sense of self-efficacy.

A common tendency here is to refer to their academic background as a prerequisite for their current position and sense of self, thus constructing a sense of self-consistency, but several of them point to a specific time when they made the decision to 'just be a manager,' again highlighting the active choice.

Now I am a manager. (...) For the first four years I kept my research on the back burner (...) But I felt that I ended up dawdling, and I honestly thought it was hard. Maybe one could find the time for it, but I thought it was hard. ... And the research one does is in my opinion not that good. (...) So that's why I decided three or four years ago, that now I am not an active researcher<sup>1</sup>

This way of constructing a 'manager-identity' is clearly influenced by newer ideas of strategic management, which is by several respondents constructed as incongruent with the researcher role.

Cues from ideas of professionalized management are extracted and connected to story, e.g. several respondents indicate that they need and appreciate management tools, but that such tools have been scarce and valued negatively in the academic system, illustrating the retrospective nature of sensemaking. They further distance themselves from the academic frames, by pointing to the fact that being a manager leaves a 'hole' in the academic CV as managerial tasks are not credited. This makes it even more difficult to return to academia, as fundraising might become problematic. The past thereby frames the present and the possible futures as a consequence of the way sense is made.

You really do have a hole in a modern CV, don't you, because you can't stay on the same level. (...) If you go back to being a professor, then you have to apply for external funding. (And the chances of success depends) on whether the ones that distribute those funds, actually perceive the job as manager, as a competent way of filling a hole in a CV.

This manager type also clearly emotionally connect with the management job, using affective words such as 'exciting,' 'ambitions' and similar phrases when speaking of the position and their reasons for applying, thus valuating the role positively and indicating that they have included the role as manager as an integrate and very influential



part in their identity construction. They have in other words become *academic managers*, i.e. managers with an academic background, but with no academic ‘production.’

Another way of constructing the identity balance is to attempt to integrate the two roles in a composite identity. This strategy is characteristic of the coordinator type department head, who tends to ‘make time for research,’ thus emphasizing the role as an academic as a integrated part of the manager identity and not just an antecedent to the present position. A few seem to have found a ‘peaceful balance’ between the two roles, where one role is not perceived as a hindrance to the other, but this balance seems to be the exception to the rule. Most of the respondents that adhere to this type in their sensemaking process have a very conflict-ridden view of themselves and the position that they are in. In this group several respondents mentioned symptoms of stress, a sense of ‘feeling drained’ of academic competency thus indicating a threat to their sense of self-efficacy. They all highlight being urged to apply for the job and most also express reluctance towards taking the job.

It was never an intentional choice, it really wasn't. And I really did try to make others, that I thought were older and more suited for the job, take it, but they could all present some strong arguments for why I should do it

They thereby extract cues that maintain and fortify a positive image – both in the eyes of themselves and of the ‘others’ they deem significant. It helps create a specific story and sense of consistency, as it constructs a meaningful relationship between the identity-of-the-past and the identity-of-the-present using the frames that are considered valuable. It is clear that the being ‘urged’ provides a vital cue in this story as it enhances the feeling of justification for being in the job, i.e. others believe that I would be the best for the job. It also speaks of how the ‘audience’ is perceived, as it clearly highlight the ‘significant others’ in the story, i.e. the ones that did the ‘urging.’

As Mills, Thurlow, and Mills (2010) point out, an organization’s norms, language and standards will have an impact on the sensemaking of individuals, and it is clear that the traditional academic norms and values play a vital part in the cognitive frames that the coordinator ‘draws on’ in the identity construction process, as they come to serve as scales by which cues are measured. As one department head states: ‘I am mainly a manager, and I get dumber and dumber every day ...,’ which illustrates how a cue (being mainly a manager – in relation to the balance between the manager role and the academic role) is valued using an ‘academic frame’ (getting dumber and dumber). This means that a conflict tends to arise when they at the same time attempt to include this role into their identity, e.g. by constructing it as an interesting and exiting job. In other words: it seems that several, mutually conflicting cognitive frames are used to make sense of the situation. This complicates the coordinator’s ability to maintain a positive sense of self, as the scales that are used to measure success and failure are inconsistent. In this way the identity construction of the coordinator can be seen as ‘manager-academic’; oscillating between identity constructions.

Finally, a way of handling the balance between different identities is the way of the shielder. This type clearly adheres to the academic identity – the manager-role is not a part of the identity construction, but simply a job that one must temporarily occupy. The shielder tends to objectify the reasons for applying, e.g. by stating that they had to do it or the department would collapse, that they were ‘told to do it’ by their peers, or that they see themselves as the lesser of several evils, thus externalizing the role.

I was never supposed to be a manager, but that’s how it ended up. And then it has stuck with me ever since ... But I still feel that it is a job, that has to be done, but that it is a really important job too actually, because since the University Act has evolved the way it has, it is fairly important there are some of us, that still think of it as a, let’s say ‘classical university’

This can be seen as a way of handling the internal conflict experienced by the coordinator who attempts to find a balance between the two roles. By externalizing the role and not including it in the identity construction, one does not have to deal with inconsistent frames. The only relevant scales and standards are the academic ones, and even though some of the respondents express that the manager role has turned out to be somewhat interesting, it is clear that this is also based on academic norms and values, i.e. a professional interest.

The same tendency emerges when looking at how the shielder attempts to obtain self-consistency. One very classic academic value is one of communality and this value is used as a cue used to emphasize the sacrifices that are necessary when taking on the role as department head.

... of course I could have just ‘defected’ when I had to apply for it, but by then we were facing a situation where the top level management were doing some things [...] There was actually a bit of a war for a while, and if I hadn’t chosen to apply for the job, then I don’t think that the department would be here today

This group thus quite clearly label themselves as *academics*, and the management job is seen as a *role*. It is thus not linked to their identity, but simply ‘a hat’ that is put on in specific situations.

We thus have three distinct ways of balancing between the role as an academic and as a manager in the identity construction process, which are congruent with the three department head types, outlined in the introduction, which are illustrated in Table 2.

**‘Who are we?’**

As outlined in the theoretical framework, the perceived identity of the organization, and the perceived image (how others view the organization), are seen as critical to the identity construction and sensemaking process (Weick 1995; Dutton and Dukerich 1991).

The narratives indicates that the department heads from the ‘new,’ more entrepreneurial university seem to use the perceived organizational identity to make sense of their own role, and pick out cues from this identity and connect it to their own identity construction.

Table 2. Balancing between academic and manager identity.

	Shielders	Coordinators	Agenda setters
Manager versus academic	Academic – maintain and fortify their academic identity construction – managing is a temporary <i>role</i>	Manager-academic – attempt to balance the role/shift back and forth in their identity construction	(Academic) manager – completely assume the role as a manager, and actively integrate into their identity construction



... If you walk around campus, I think that you will find that people are actually really happy with, and maybe even quite proud of the organization and the whole basic philosophy here and the way it is run ...

Almost all of the department heads employed at this university refer to their organization in a positive way, either by highlighting the ‘basic philosophy’ as in the quote above, or by referring to ‘a special way of thinking,’ which makes it easier to ‘start things up.’ This sense of uniqueness also appears when referring to other universities, particularly ‘traditional’ universities that are perceived as having more severe problems adapting to new circumstances. Another way of using the organization is by situating it locally, and referring to it as a ‘regional university’ and emphasizing the positive relation to the community – and thus the positive *image*. In this way the perceived organizational identity provides a self-enhancement tool in the individual sensemaking processes, as they aid the department heads in boosting feelings of self-distinction.

This positive recognition of the organization does not occur in the narratives of the department heads of the ‘traditional’ university. The primary sources of identification here are departmental, disciplinary and the professional networks, which are actively used in identity construction. There can be many reasons for this lack of identification with the ‘traditional university’; as mentioned the organization has recently gone through a massive – and in many respects unpopular – restructuring exercise, which might have affected the sense of organizational identity.

In this way it seems that if an organizational identity is perceived to be strong and/or distinct, it is likely to be used in the identity constructions of the department heads, as part of the self-enhancement, i.e. the positive self-distinctions. This is illustrated very well when one department head spoke of new demands for interdisciplinarity:

... well that is the pleasant circumstance here, that this interdisciplinarity has been practiced here. It has been the foundation here at (the university) in some ways [...] It makes no noticeable difference, because it already exists in the building blocks that we move around. Naturally, it will be a big challenge in Y and other places. But for us it is just more of the same, somehow.

When looking at the differences across manager types, the narratives also indicates that the salience of the organizational identity and image is stronger for the coordinator and the agenda setter type, as illustrated in Table 3. Where the organizational identity is perceived to be strong, the coordinator and agenda setter tend to use it as a means to enhance sense of self, while the shielder does not.

Table 3. Organizational identity and image.

	Shielders	Coordinators	Agenda setters
Sense of organizational identity and image	Identify primarily with the academic community, the discipline, etc.	If a strong organizational identity is perceived, it is actively used as a cue in the identity construction	If a strong organizational identity is perceived, it is actively used as a cue in the identity construction

***‘How do we do things?’***

As mentioned, one of the key assumptions here is that the identity constructions are not purely cognitive processes, but also impact the organizational context as the department heads enact their environment, thus producing a ‘new reality’ to deal with.

As the previous sections have shown, it is clear that the identity constructions differ according to the type of department head. The shielder has a tendency towards ‘finding time for research,’ regardless of the organizational affiliation. The shielder emphasizes and reframes the role as an academic, thus evoking an academic framework with scales, norms and values by which one can measure oneself and others. This naturally affects managerial behavior as these scales are also used to judge other actors and, for example, some of the reform initiatives:

So about quantity and rankings and publication index [ ... ] I mean, it is not completely farfetched, it is more the fact that an unreasonable emphasis is put on quantitative things and that influences behavior. Because obviously, if you get credit for writing two articles instead of one, and it is possible to cut it in two, well then you do it. Even though, from an academic point of view, it would be more relevant to do a complete, thoroughly prepared work.

By evoking the academic standards, they legitimize behavior that could by other standards be seen as disloyalty or incompliance. For example when asked about new demands for the preparation of strategic plans at department level – a demand influenced by new ideas of accountability and strategic capabilities in HE, several department heads (shielders) describe how they tend to describe work that is already going on and ‘dress it up’; a form of decoupling action from talk (Brunsson 1986). This type of behavior is legitimized by framing the demands for strategic plans as management jumping through the hoops of politicians and therefore demands that are not academically relevant. Another action pattern, which is not quite as radical, is what is described in the quote above, namely the inclination towards defiant compliance. Where decoupling is not possible, e.g. because of structural and legislative demands, the typical action pattern becomes: ‘we will do what they say, but they can’t tell us to like it – or be quiet about our discomfort.’ This action pattern is characteristic of the shielder type (see Table 4).

The coordinators also exhibit tendencies towards defiance, e.g. expressed discomfort and dissatisfaction with circumstances as a deliberate strategy, but the defiance is less pronounced. The coordinator is characterized by a somewhat schizophrenic sense-making and identity construction process, where both the past and the new change impulses are valued positively, and the cognitive frames that are employed are sometimes contradictory. Management is admittedly important and even interesting to the coordinator, but since academic scales are used to measure oneself, this interest becomes problematic. This leads to a ‘quiet’ or ‘subtle’ type of management – where department heads seek to implement change and new ideas in a manner which will not arouse resistance. The coordinator often attempts to externalize or refute the

Table 4. Manager behavior.

	Shielders	Coordinators	Agenda setters
Manager behavior	Decoupling or defiant compliance	Subtle agreement while projecting a defiant attitude	Leader – active role model

manager-identity when dealing with academic staff (former peers), while at the same time internalizing it in the identity construction. This also means that they *project* a different attitude towards management to their surroundings, to obtain legitimacy and recognition by academic scales, than the attitude they articulate in the identity construction process, i.e. a decoupling of image and identity.

The agenda setter clearly evokes other cognitive frames, e.g. by constructing their present position as personal choice rather than an obligation. This also reflects in a more personal leadership style, where a typical action pattern is to be an active role model, who ‘embodies the change’ one wishes to see in the employees.

## Conclusions

The present study has shown that there are different ways of striking the balance between the role as academic and the role as manager in the identity construction process, there are different ways of using the organization in this process, and that these differences also influence management practice. The central findings are summarized in Table 5.

The aim of the present paper was to further refine the typology of higher education middle managers in order to add to the understanding of how sense is made and with

Table 5. Typology of department heads – identity construction.

	Shielders	Coordinators	Agenda setters
Attitude towards change	<i>Absorbers of change</i> View change impulses as disruptive and attempt to protect employees from them by way of e.g. decoupling	<i>Translators of change</i> View it as their job to translate and reshape change impulses in a preserving way, to ease implementation	<i>Initiators of change</i> Actively formulate change initiatives and see them through. See their own main role as entrepreneur
Sensemaking strategy	Preserving – value the past positively, and aim to retain as much of it as possible	Preserving and evolving – depending on the situation	Evolving – value the past negatively, thus legitimizing change
Manager versus academic	Academic – maintain and fortify their academic identity construction – managing is a temporary role	Manager-academic – attempt to balance the role/shift back and forth in their identity construction	(Academic) manager – completely assume the role as a manager, and actively integrate into their identity construction
Sense of organizational identity and image	Identify primarily with the academic community, the discipline, etc.	If a strong organizational identity is perceived, it is actively used as a cue in the identity construction	If a strong organizational identity is perceived, it is actively used as a cue in the identity construction
Manager behavior	Decoupling or defiant compliance	Subtle agreement while projecting a defiant attitude	Leader – active role model

what consequences to practice. The typology is a conceptual representation of the similarities and differences that emerged from the analysis of the narratives, and thereby not a grouping of the respondents from the study. Indeed one would be hard pressed to find any one department head fitting precisely into only one category. In fact a more accurate description would be that all the respondents comprise all three categories, but that the sensemaking and identity construction highlights one of them in a specific time and space.

However the argument is that the typology can serve as a useful interpretive tool, when attempting to understand responses to change and managerial behavior in HEIs. The typology can therefore be used as a starting point in further studies of identity construction processes in HEIs in times of reform, as it indicates factors that might explain variations both across and inside specific institutions. The findings in the present study also add to the growing body of knowledge about the how the changing circumstances in HEIs construct new roles and action patterns for both academics and other staff. The typology developed in the present study, for example, resonates with the findings of Deem, Reed, and Hillyard (2007), who identified three typical 'routes' into management for academics, which are fairly consistent with the department head types in the typology.

The findings also support the work of Henkel (1997, 2000, 2005) who have highlighted the continued importance of academic ideas and identities, by illustrating how these ideas are used and how they interact and affect the way action is shaped. A vital addition to this perspective is that the present study has illuminated how the perceived identity of the individual HEI is used and constructed – not just the academic norms, values and ideas, i.e. the 'identity of academia.'

A final conclusion worth highlighting is that the coordinator type is most likely to experience or express signs of stress and feelings of inadequacy. This stems from the inconsistent frames that are used to create identity. This conclusion emphasizes the need to investigate the factors that promote the identification with the coordinator-type, i.e. whether there are specific conditions that encourage or drive department heads to make sense as coordinators or other types. One indication from the present study could be that the demand for/expectation of the department heads to keep up with research in order to maintain legitimacy with the academic staff could inspire coordinator type behavior, and thus lead to schizophrenic sensemaking processes and feelings of insufficiency. The findings are also highly relevant in e.g. recruitment considerations, as they speak to the conditions that are offered to prospective managers, and to the candidates that are attracted to the position.

The findings are however not only relevant to studies of managers. It is inherent in the very concept of management, that managers have some influence on their employees and a vast body of literature on leadership suggests numerous linkages between the self-image and behavior of managers, and the perceptions and actions of the managed, e.g. in terms of motivation (e.g. Argyris 1971), commitment (e.g. Thompson and Heron 2005), identification (e.g. Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994; Ashforth and Mael 1989), role model processes (e.g. Rich 1997) and the ever growing amount of leadership studies (see e.g. Yukl 1989 and Bryman 2004 for an overview). In the sensemaking perspective however, the relation between manager and employee can also be seen as a sensegiving/sensemaking relation – the manager sensegives while sensemaking, but as the present study has shown, there are significant differences in how this plays out. For example, when the shielder practices decoupling or defiant compliance, this enacts a 'reality' or a legitimate action pattern that employees (or other managers) can use in

their own sensemaking. In this way identity constructions also have implications for governance, as they set premises on which future decisions can be made (Weick 1995, 113ff). In this light the study opens up interesting questions as to how sense is projected and constructed on other levels in universities.

## Note

1. All quotes are translated by the author.

## References

- Argyris, C. 1971. *Management and organizational development: The path from XA to YB*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Ashforth, B.E., and F. Mael. 1989. Social identity theory and the organisation. *Academy of Management Review* 14, no 1: 20–39.
- Becher, T., and P.R. Trowler. 2001. *Academic tribes and territories: Intellectual enquiry and the culture of disciplines*. Buckingham: SRHE/Open University Press.
- Bleiklie, I., and M. Kogan. 2006. Comparison and theories. In *Transforming higher education: A comparative study* (2nd ed.), eds. M. Kogan, M. Bauer, I. Bleiklie and M. Henkel, 3–22. The Netherlands: Springer.
- Brown, A.D., P. Stacey, and J. Nandhakumar. 2008. Making sense of sensemaking narratives. *Human Relations* 61, no 8: 1035–62.
- Brunsson, N. 1986. Organizing for inconsistencies: on organizational conflict, depression and hypocrisy as substitutes for action. *Scandinavian Journal of Management Studies* 2, no 3: 165–85.
- Bryman, A. 2004. Qualitative research on leadership: A critical but appreciative review. *The Leadership Quarterly* 15, no 6: 729–69.
- Coopey, J., O. Keegan, and N. Emler. 1997. Managers' innovations as 'sense-making'. *British Journal of Management* 8: 301–15.
- De Boer, H., L. Goedegebuure, and V.L. Meek. 2010. The changing nature of academic middle management: A framework for analysis. In *The changing dynamics of higher education middle management*, eds. L.V. Meek, L. Goedegebuure, R. Santiago and T. Carvalho, 229–41. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Deem, R. 2004. The knowledge worker, the manager-academic and the contemporary UK university: New and old forms of public management? *Financial Accountability & Management* 20, no 2: 107–28.
- Deem, R., M. Reed, and S. Hillyard. 2007. *Knowledge, higher education, and the new managerialism: The changing management of UK universities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Degn, L., and M.P. Sørensen. 2012. Universitetsloven fra 2003. På vej mod konkurrenceuniversitetet (The University Act of 2003. Heading toward the competition university). In *Dansk forskningspolitik efter årtusindskiftet* (Danish research policy in the new millennium), eds. K. Aagaard and N. Mejlgaard. Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag.
- Degn, L. 2013. Making sense of management: A study of department heads' sensemaking processes in a changing environment. In *Resilient universities – confronting changes in a challenging world*, eds. J.E. Karlens and R.M.O. Pritchard, 191–211. Bern: Peter Lang.
- Dutton, J. E., and J.M. Dukerich. 1991. Keeping an eye on the mirror: Image and identity in organizational adaptation. *Academy of Management Journal* 34, no 3: 517–34.
- Dutton, J.E., J. Dukerich, and C.V. Harquail. 1994. Organizational images and member identification. *Administrative Science Quarterly* June: 239–62.
- Erez, M., and P.C. Earley. 1993. *Culture, self-identity and work*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Etzkowitz, H., and L. Leydesdorff. 1997. *Universities and the global knowledge economy: A triple helix of academy-industry-government relations*. London: Pinter.
- Gecas, V. 1982. The self-concept. *Annual Review of Sociology* 8: 1–33.
- Gioia, D.A., and K. Chittipeddi. 1991. Sensemaking and sensegiving in strategic change initiation. *Strategic Management Journal* 12: 433–48.

- Gornitzka, Å., and P. Maassen. 2000. National policies concerning the economic role of higher education. *Higher Education Policy* 13 no. 3: 225–30.
- Henkel, M. 1997. Academic values and the university as corporate enterprise. *Higher Education Quarterly* 51, no. 2: 134–43.
- Henkel, M. 2000. *Academic identities and policy change in higher education*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Henkel, M. 2005. Academic identity and autonomy in a changing policy Environment. *Higher Education* 49: 155–76.
- Kezar, A. 2013. Understanding sensemaking/sensegiving in transformational change processes from the bottom up. *Higher Education* 65: 761–80.
- Maitlis, S. 2005. The social processes of organizational sensemaking. *The Academy of Management Journal* 48, no. 1: 21–49.
- Meek, V.L., L. Goedegebuure, R. Santiago, and T. Carvalho. 2010. *The changing dynamics of higher education middle management*. Series: Higher Education Dynamics, 33. Dordrecht: Springer Science + Business Media.
- Mills, J.H., A. Thurlow, and A.J. Mills. 2010. Making sense of sensemaking: the critical sense-making approach. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal* 5, no. 2: 182–95.
- Rich, G.A. 1997. The sales manager as a role model: Effects on trust, job satisfaction, and performance of salespeople. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 25, no. 4: 319–28.
- Smerek, R. 2011. Sensemaking and sensegiving: An exploratory study of the simultaneous “being and learning” of new college and university presidents. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies* 18, no. 1: 80–94.
- Smircich, L., and C. Stubbart. 1985. Strategic management in an enacted world. *Academy of Management Review* 10, no. 4: 724–36.
- Starbuck, W.H., and F.J. Milliken. 1988. Executives’ perceptual filters: What they notice and how they make sense. In *The executive effect: Concepts and methods for studying top managers*, ed. D.C. Hambrick, 35–65. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Stensaker, B., J. Enders, and H. de Boer. 2007. *Comparative analysis. The extent and impact of higher education governance reform across Europe*. Enschede: CHEPS, NIFU STEP, CHE, ESMU.
- Thompson, M., and P. Heron. 2005. The difference a manager can make: organizational justice and knowledge worker commitment. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* 16, no. 3: 383–404.
- Weick, K.E. 1988. Enacted sensemaking in crisis situations. *Journal of Management Studies* 25, no. 4: 305–17.
- Weick, K.E. 1993. The collapse of sensemaking in organizations: The mann gulch disaster. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 38: 628–52.
- Weick, K.E. 1995. *Sensemaking in organizations*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Weick, K.E., K. Sutcliffe, and D. Obstfeld. 2005. Organizing and the process of sensemaking. *Organization Science* 16, no. 4: 409–21.
- Yukl, G. 1989. Managerial leadership: A review of theory and research. *Journal of management* 15, no. 2: 251–89.

Chapter 8:  
The sensemaking processes of  
academic staff in Danish universities

Article currently under review in *Studies in Higher Education*

## The sensemaking processes of academic staff in Danish universities

Reforms and changing ideas about what higher education institutions are and should be have put pressure on academic identity. The present paper explores the way academics in Danish universities make sense of their changing circumstances, and how this affects their perceptions of their organization, their leaders and of themselves. The study highlights how the formal organizations' translations of external impulses and ideas constitute a more severe threat on the perceived identity of the academic staff than the impulses and ideas themselves. The findings indicate that with the tighter couplings of top level management and the political system, the coupling and identification between academic staff and the formal organization may become weaker. Also the behavioral responses perceived threats are studied, by examining the 'us'/'them' categorizations of the academics, providing a burgeoning conceptual framework for further studies into how academics change their actions as a result of reforms or organizational change.

Keywords: academic staff; identity; identity formation; academic work and identity; organizational reform

### Introduction

Often characterized as a value-laden, relatively static and highly institutionalized field, academia seems to be riddled with values, norms, routines and ideas which significantly impact how it is possible to act and think within them (e.g. Smerek 2011; Olsen 2005). However over the past decades these highly institutionalized ways of thinking and acting have been challenged by new ideas about what academia is and should be. Some of the more notable ideas affecting the discourse are the concept of 'the knowledge society', 'the knowledge economy', and notions of flexibility, entrepreneurialism, accountability and what is increasingly known in academia as 'new managerialism' (Kogan et al. 2000; Gornitzska and Maassen 2000; Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff 1997; Deem, Reed, and Hillyard 2007). These impulses and ideas have in most – if not all European countries, led to significant reforms of the higher education systems, targeting not least the governance and management structures of higher education institutions, in order to make them more adaptable, powerful and accountable.. In Denmark this became very visible in the debate surrounding the University Act of 2003, where both the legal, institutional status of universities was changed, as well as the internal management structures. These changes were greeted with significant resistance from the academic staff, as they were seen to break with the very fibers of academia and academic culture, i.e. the notions of academic self-governance and academic freedom<sup>1</sup>. But even though the critics were very outspoken and came to dominate the public debate, they were also sometimes considered to be a minority, and particularly reform proponents spoke of a 'silent majority' which saw reforms as a positive development, and were more acceptant of e.g. professionalized management.

This highlights importance of looking at perceived identity in studies of organizational change processes - also in higher education institutions (HEIs) (Henkel 2004, 2005). As Mills and colleagues point out:

---

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the national debate see <http://professorvaelde.blogspot.dk/> (in Danish).



'Change within organizations may cause individuals to ask questions such as "who are we?" or "how do we do things?" The way in which individuals make sense of these questions impacts their understandings of their own identities and that of the organization' (Mills et al. 2010, 188).

The present paper seeks to explore the way academics make sense of their changing circumstances, and how this affects their perceptions of their organization, their leaders and of themselves. These perceptions are assumed to affect the motivation, sense of belonging, and ultimately the performance and actions of organizational members (Henkel 2004; Ashforth and Mael 1989; Gioia and Thomas 1996; Dutton and Dukerich 1991), and the hope is therefore that this small scale study may point to interesting avenues for further studies of how academics make sense of and respond to organizational turmoil and change.

### The sensemaking framework

The argument that underlies the study is that external pressure on organizations tends to spur sensemaking processes, as this pressure disrupts existing meaning structures and established practices, and that this sensemaking is 'central because it is the primary site where meanings materialize that inform and constrain identity and action' (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2005). External pressure, e.g. as represented by Danish national reforms of the higher education governance and management structures, or more broadly by the emergence and promotion of new ideas about 'the knowledge economy', 'globalization' etc. in the discourse surrounding higher education, are in other words seen as drivers of sensemaking, and the purpose of the present study is to investigate how such sensemaking processes play out within the organizations – and with what behavioral consequences.

According to the sensemaking framework, individuals and organizations will, when faced with unexpected, ambiguous or uncertain circumstances, engage in sensemaking processes, attempting to create order in these circumstances in a way that enables further action (Weick 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2005; Mills 2003; Mills, Thurlow, and Mills 2010). Sensemaking thus describes the ongoing processes wherein individuals and organizations construct a plausible story of 'what is going on' by picking out cues (events, ideas, issues etc.), which are deemed salient in relation to existing frames (mental modes, cultural scripts etc.). The stories that are constructed in such processes act as organizing tools, which allows certain elements of the past, present and future to emerge and others to wither away (perhaps only to be brought forth in future sensemaking processes). Sensemaking thereby:

"unfolds as a sequence in which people concerned with identity in the social context of other actors engage ongoing circumstances from which they extract cues and make plausible sense retrospectively, while enacting more or less order into those ongoing circumstances" (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2005, 409),

By looking at sensemaking processes we should therefore gain an insight into how academics pick out problems, events, ideas etc. that they deem relevant, and therefore worthy to act upon. As the definition above indicates that a key element of sensemaking is identity construction and maintenance – both to the individual and the organization. When new ideas about what a university is and should be emerge, or when higher education institutions are

reformed as a consequence of these ideas, organization members are forced to address questions of identity – both their personal and professional sense of self as well as their perception of the organization they work for.

This means that in a sensemaking perspective, an organization's identity – classically defined as 'that which is central, enduring and distinctive about an organization's character (Albert and Whetten 1985) – is seen to be a contestable and dynamic construct, which is negotiated and reformed in the ongoing sensemaking processes that takes place inside and organization (Gioia, Schultz, and Corley 2000; Ravasi and Schultz 2006; Dutton and Dukerich 1991). The labels we use to describe the elements of an identity might give the impression of a stable, enduring entity, but in fact these elements are 'subject to multiple and variable interpretations' (Gioia, Schultz, and Corley 2000), as organization members are faced with changing environments and impulses.

This also implicates that there may be differing interpretations and constructions of identity within an organization; top level managers may not have the same perception of what is central, enduring and distinct about an organization as the employees, and there may be similar differences between departments and professional groups. This is particularly relevant in studies of organizations such as HEIs which can be seen as very loosely-coupled (Weick 1976), and where professional, disciplinary and departmental culture offers many possibilities for identification.

Henkel (2005), inspired by Taylor (1989), similarly points to the importance of a 'defining community' in identity construction, as it offers the individuals a language, world views, ideas and myths that can be used to create a sensible sense of self. She goes on to note that in the case of HEIs, the institution 'has more power to affect academic working lives, but it may be weaker source of identification' (2005, 164). The question following this is then which sources of identification becomes salient for the academics, e.g. science, the academic community, personal (cross-disciplinary) networks etc. The frames available for sensemaking processes are in other words abundant in complex organizations such as HEIs and creating change is far from a simple matter.

Attempts of willfully changing members' perceptions of the organization and its identity are however often seen in, what in the sensemaking framework can be described as sensegiving attempts. Sensegiving can be seen as the management's effort to provide the employees with a 'viable interpretation of a new reality' and attempting to make them 'adopt it as their own' (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991, 433); a process which is then concerned with projecting a new/transformed sense of who they are as an organization.

### **Identity threats and sensemaking**

Perceived threats against what members believe to be the central, distinctive and enduring characteristics of their organizations (or other salient sources of identification) greatly influences how these members relate to and perceive themselves and their surroundings – and indeed how they might change those perceptions as a result (Dutton and Dukerich 1991; Ravasi and Schultz 2006). Research on identity threats traditionally centers round exploring the dynamic interplay between organization members' perceptions of identity, i.e. how they perceive themselves, and their construed external image, i.e. how they think others perceive them (Elsbach and Kramer 1996; Dutton and Dukerich 1991). A dissonance between these

two perceptions constitutes an identity threat and will prompt new sensemaking processes, as such threats question the perceived order of things and challenges the meaning already created. The externally construed images and perceptions of organizational identity can in sensemaking terminology be seen as frames and cues that are available to the organizational members in their sensemaking process, and if these are perceived to be ambiguous or inconsistent, an interpretation and selection will occur.

Threats to the organizational identity are not only assumed to be important to the perception of the organization's identity, but also to the social and personal identity of the individual organization member, as an individual's sense of self is seen to be shaped in part by membership in both organizations (Albert, Ashforth, and Dutton 2000), occupational groups (Van Maanen and Barley 1984) and work groups (Alderfer and Smith 1982) – i.e. the defining communities. Hence where a positive perception of the organization's identity enhances a positive self-image, a new threat to the organizational identity may shatter the positive perception held by organization members, and will incite identification with other groups and categories in their sensemaking, e.g. disciplinary or professional groups (researcher or teacher) or more generalized categories (mother or piano-player), i.e. a type of selective identification and categorization (Elsbach and Kramer 1996). Such responses to identity threats can in this perspective be seen as representations of the sensemaking processes of organization members; as part of the stories they construct in order to retain a meaningful relation to their organization.

### Sensemaking in Danish higher education institutions – analytical strategy

The purpose of the present paper is as mentioned to explore the sensemaking processes of academics in universities under pressure. Sensemaking is seen to be driven and accentuated by the feeling of increasing complexity or unfamiliar circumstances, which makes Danish higher education institutions a good place to start when exploring such processes. The Danish higher education system has in the past decades been subject to a series of comprehensive reforms, doing away with the traditionally very strong collegiate bodies, e.g. the Senate, and replaced them with external majority governing boards, and abolished the elected leader system, in favor of an appointment scheme. At the same time other reforms targeted the funding scheme, e.g. by making the HEIs very dependent on external funding and by implementing a bibliometric performance measurement system, which favored international publications in high ranking journals (Aagaard and Mejlgaard 2012).

Following the framework outlined in the previous sections, the central research questions are thus focused on how the academics construct their sense of organizational identity and enact this onto their environment? The analysis is based on a small scale study academics from 3 departments – one Natural Science Department, one Social Science and one from the Humanities – at 2 Danish universities undergoing significant changes and reforms. The two universities are good examples of organizations where sensemaking is likely to be palpable and thus more easily recognizable, as they were both at the time of the data collection undergoing significant changes – one due to a comprehensive restructuring exercise, and one due to significant economic challenges.

The narratives that form the basis of the analysis were collected via 3 focus group interviews, where a total of 12 academics participated. Each focus group consisted of academics in the early stages of their career as well as more senior staff. The aim of this selection of participants – and departments – was to achieve as much variation as possible, in order to obtain as many perspectives and angles on the research question as possible. The sensemaking processes of junior staff was expected to be different from those of senior staff, as well as differences across disciplines were expected as the professional cultures, departmental traditions etc. vary across these borders. The aim was thus to capture as much of this variation in the limited empirical data. It is however important to bear in mind that purpose of the study is not to explain but to explore, and it is therefore best described as a critical case study of how sensemaking plays in organizations under pressure (Flyvbjerg 2006). This limited empirical basis of the study naturally means that the question posed above will not be answered to the fullest, but the hope was to shed some light on the dynamics of sensemaking processes within highly institutionalized organizations under transformation, and point to interesting questions for further research.

The interviews were structured around questions about motivation for going into - and staying in – the career as an academic, about the perceived conditions of academic work, the perception of the new management and governance structures etc. The data analysis initially consisted of a first-order coding of the interview transcripts, inspired by the ‘grounded’ approach to qualitative data analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The coding focused on the thematic content of the interview sessions, i.e. what did they talk about, which resulted in 16 broad categories, such as e.g. motivation, relations to top level management, relations to department head etc. These broad categories were then reviewed in relation to the sensemaking framework, and the terminology provided by this and the organizational identity literature, which lead to the development of more generalized and theoretically informed categories, in what could be named a second-order analysis. The results of this second order analysis are presented in the following sections.

### Identity threats and identification

The first part of the analysis deals with how the academics construct identifiable categories out of the impulses that they are met with in the work environment. The aim is to explore which defining communities are brought out in the sensemaking processes and how they inform the identity creation and maintenance. Specific emphasis is on how these identity constructions are perceived to be threatened by the rising demands and external pressure that characterizes Danish higher education presently.

The characteristics that are mentioned throughout the narratives as being important to the respondents in their practice are features such as ‘being a critical voice’, ‘being quality committed’, ‘freedom of thought and methods’, ‘autonomy’, ‘communality’ and ‘vanity/prestige’; characteristics that are clearly linked to a more generalized perception of organization, rather than the two formal organizations. In fact, the universities as formal organizations seem to be of little importance in the sensemaking processes, and when speaking of enduring, central and distinctive characteristics, the academics seem to refer to ‘academia’ or ‘The University’ as an abstraction, as their primary source of identification rather

than their specific place of employment<sup>2</sup>. This resonates well with previous studies of academic identity, which have highlighted the salience of the discipline at the expense of the formal organization in identity narratives (Deem 2004; Henkel 2005), and also speaks to the influence of perceptions of professional identity. The study indicates that the role as an academic – and the understandings of collective associated with it – seems to be more important than organizational membership.

The characteristics that emerge in the narratives seem to comprise the frame through which the respondents interpret the impulses and ideas that they are confronted with. However, it is when looking at how threats are perceived that the identifications and categorizations become particularly visible in the narratives.

External pressure particularly associated with concepts of ‘managerialism’, ‘performance measurement’ etc. emerges throughout the sensemaking narratives as a threat to this perception of identity. These impulses are however primarily constructed as threats by way of their translations, i.e. they are seen as threatening because the political system have interpreted them in a specific way, as in the quote below where the respondent speaks of New Public Management:

‘I think what frustrates me a lot is that they have not gone all the way. Now, I came from 15 years in the private sector [...] and there I was used to doing performance measurement and setting up targets and... and then we also discussed salaries based on the performance of the year... But here it is like they have made this hybrid-thing, where you are measured on some things, but not on all things, and it is very hard to determine why it is exactly these things that are measured and not others... It seems we have gotten an absurdum out of it...’ (Professor, Natural Science)

New Public Management is thereby not necessarily seen as a threat, however the political and organizational translation and interpretation of this set of ideas might. This is especially visible when the academics address the bibliometric performance measurement system, and the increasing pressure for international publication (i.e. performance measurement). The system is constructed as a political interpretation of an international tendency and is clearly seen as a threat, especially to the ‘quality commitment’ characteristic.

‘This is really where we have a schism, because [...] we are suffering pressure on the resource side and on all these measurement things that have come in. Because before, it was perfectly fine if [...] an employee said: now I’m gonna focus on writing an educational book for a couple of years and do some good teaching. And nobody came and beat him over the head, because he didn’t produce his 2,5 papers a year. Today... you sit in the middle of a counselling session with a student and you think: well, I could have written half a paper’ (Professor, Natural Sciences)

However, another interesting trend is that a significant amount of identity threats are seen as stemming from the formal organization, i.e. the specific university, and its interpretation

---

<sup>2</sup> Note that the respondents were never asked explicitly to list the central, enduring and distinctive characteristics of their organization, but that these characteristics emerged in the discussions concerning the motivation for becoming and remaining in an academic career and concerning the terms and conditions of their own practice and daily work.

of external pressure:

‘And that is one of the things I find most frustrating, that is that the upper levels... It seems sometimes that the upper levels have no idea what research is and what it is about. And they have some ideas about managing it, without having a sense of what drives the actual researchers’ (Professor, Social Sciences)

Internal pressure, as a result of the organizations’ interpretations and translation of external pressure, is in this way seen as a bigger threat than the ‘initial’ impulse. These perceived threats on identity stemming from inside the organization are seen as much more ‘serious’ and ‘hurtful’ as they are linked more closely to the personal identification of the academics.

‘...right now it [organizational change] is happening with such force and with a – in our opinion – lack of understanding and insight and lack of respect for disciplinary traditions etc., that you feel completely detached. And there is a long way to go from such a self-governance culture, where you actually feel like the core and... just suddenly being these “laborers”....’ (Associate Professor, Humanities).

The experience of these threats as more severe than the external ones is clearly linked to the personal identification with the organization and thus the link between personal and organizational identity. Some accounts almost resemble stories of betrayal, when speaking of the initiatives of the top level management of the organizations:

‘That experience that... the shocking experience that one of our own... I always imagined that they had their hands tied; I mean that it was all dictated from above... this standardization... It was just going to be implemented, and ”if you want to keep your job, you’ll do it, or we find someone else”... But of course, it is naïve to think it is that simple, but I think I lured myself into thinking it, because I simply couldn’t understand.. The lack of understanding...’ (Associate Professor, Humanities).

Even though not all accounts are this dramatic and personal, most respondents demonstrate the same tendency to perceive threats stemming from their own organization as more severe and indeed more threatening than external ones.

These upper levels are often described as political, as detached from academic practice and as lacking legitimacy, indicating again that the formal organization is less connected to the salient frames used in the sensemaking process. The relationship with these ‘upper levels’ is often characterized by lack of recognition, appreciation and respect:

‘...the further you get up to that political level, the Dean’s level, there you have the feeling that they simply have not sense of what we are doing. And they have no respect for it, and that’s what makes you tired right? And demotivated...’ (Assistant professor, Humanities).

It is evident that the sensegiving attempts of the top level management are dismissed in the sensemaking processes of the employees. This dismissal is as the quotes indicate founded in a perception of irrelevance; that the cues that the sensegiving projects are perceived to be irrelevant to the frames that are important to the respondents. This also results in a disassociation in identity between the academic staff and the top level management layer, i.e. they

are not like us, we do not understand their logic and they don't understand ours.

The closest level of management, i.e. the department head, is very often 'protected' from the negative categorizations of the other management levels, and characterized as 'one of us' or 'not a real manager' etc.

'.. the problem is that he needs to be protected right? Because he can't [...]... He is trying to be a Department Head as in the old days, to be everywhere and listening to people. ... And that's it, a Department Head needs to know his people. There shouldn't be more employees than he will be able to know... know their story...' (2 Associate Professors, Humanities)

The perception of management thereby also seems influenced by the academic frames, with its notions of 'communality' and 'autonomy'. This indicates that the academics construct very clear boundaries between who 'we' are and who 'they' are, which resonates well with Bernstein (1996) claim that identities are strongest and most stable in within the context of strong classification. It is clear in this way that the top level management – and by extension the formal organization – is excluded from the 'defining community' and thereby more easily dismissed as irrelevant. There is in this way no doubt that identity threats are present, and that they affect the sensemaking processes of the academics. However as mentioned, sensemaking is also assumed to impact action, i.e. the behavioral responses to threats.

### Responding to threats

Sensemaking processes enact and legitimize certain types of actions, and the following part of the analysis will demonstrate, that there seems to be several types of responses to the perceived threats, which might be placed on a continuum from continuation of practice (ignorance) to altered behavior (compliance). In the figure below, the types of legitimized responses found in the sensemaking narratives are summarized.

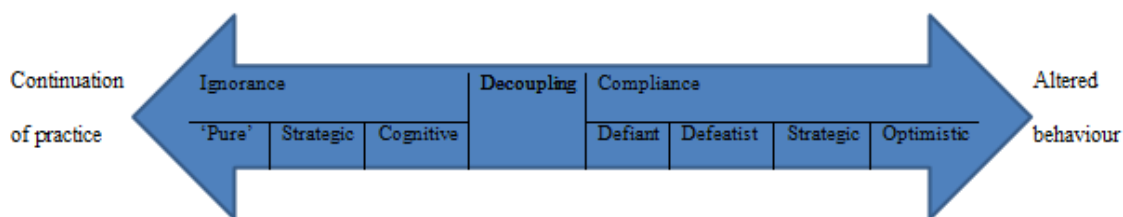


Figure 1: Responses to threats

### Ignorance and defiance

One way of responding to identity threats – and disruptions of practice in general – is through ignorance. This response is, according the sensemaking framework, a common initial response when disorder or ambiguity is encountered, because it naturally requires the least amount of alteration (Weick, Sutcliffe, Obstfeld 2005). However, as the quote below indicates, ignorance can also be used strategically – in order to destabilize the proposed new order of things, i.e. the sensegiving of the managers (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991):

‘It’s again a question of co-ownership. Because people are creatures of habit. They will do what they are used to. And all these new structural changes, it takes energy to work with it. To invest in it so to speak... And if you don’t think it makes sense, and if you cannot see yourself in it, but find it counterproductive and so on... well then you just continue doing what you’re doing until someone says: You can’t do that, or you shouldn’t have done that. And you sort of check out and say: well, that’s fine, you can have all your changes, but I will keep going as I do. And then we will see when things crash...’ (Associate Professor, Humanities)

A second type of ignorance might be labelled cognitive ignorance:

‘My way of navigating in this to myself is that I just don’t think about it [organizational changes]... I do sometimes... sometimes I might think that I am so tired of all this, but if I start doing it and then have to spend my time getting annoyed with it, then that is almost a full-time job getting annoyed with all these initiatives coming from above’ (Assistant Professor, Social Sciences)

This response might resemble compliance, as it indicates changed behavior, i.e. in compliance with the initiatives from top level management, but cognitively the strategy is to ignore the disturbances and thereby not let it influence your sensemaking process. These responses are linked with minor disturbances, which are perceived to be ‘sense-less’, i.e. they are perceived to be very different and irrelevant to the frames that are used in the sensemaking process – ‘you don’t think it makes sense, and you cannot see yourself in it’.

### **Decoupling**

Decoupling is another type of response to the perceived threats:

‘we can find our way out of this, I mean, then you can say: if I have three projects, Monday from 8 till 14 I work on this project, Tuesday on this project and so on. I could do that, and then you could see in my calendar that I have worked on it. So, we will find our way, if you try to register these things. I don’t think they will get anything out of it, and it will just be a nuisance to us’ (Assistant Professor, Social Sciences)

Decoupling is a common response to change initiatives described in organizational literature, which lies somewhere between continuation of practice and altered behavior. Decoupling describes the practice of creating gaps between talk and action or formal policies and action (Brunsson 1986). In the present study decoupling as a response to perceived threats seems to appear when ignorance is not an option, i.e. when pressure is too strong to ignore, but the disturbance is still seen as incongruent with salient frames, i.e. the academic values mentioned above.

### **Compliance**

The final type of response that emerged in the sensemaking narratives was compliance or altered behavior. This response also took many different forms, ranging from defiant or defeatist compliance to strategic or optimistic compliance.

The defiant and defeatist compliance responses lie closer to the decoupling responses described above, as they describe a type of cognitive decoupling, i.e. creating a gap between thought and action. The salient frames used to make sense of the new ideas and impulses are clearly challenged, but the answer seems to be project a defiant attitude towards



the disturbance, while altering the behavior associated with it. The mental model is in this way not changed, but legitimate or necessary actions are.

‘But now we just go for those points [in the publication model]... so in that way I think it has something counterproductive in it... the research, the quality is reduced, as we deal less and less with each other in these point-systems and administrative systems that are built..’(Professor, Social Sciences)

You try to use the data in a way that you haven’t done before, to “pour it” into many types of channels. And that might also be a good strategy if you want to stay in the system, because if you don’t deliver those publications... you probably won’t get hired’ (Assistant professor, Social Science)

At the other end of the continuum, we see responses that could be termed strategic or optimistic compliance. These types of compliance all imply an alteration of behavior and also to some extent a change in sensemaking frame. This indicates a movement towards a change in identity perception – ‘it’s a part of my world’ and ‘a normal part of the circumstances’.

‘That’s my strategy anyway, I mean I need to learn to write articles [as opposed to books]. That’s what I’m assessed on, end of story. Then perhaps, some of the articles that you’ll write, time could have been better spent, but I mean... I think that is a premise you have when you are young... [...]And then maybe your boss says that he doesn’t care so much about articles, but I have chosen to completely ignore that. It’s fine that he has that strategy, but for me... it has had a huge impact on the way I disseminate my research’ (Assistant professor, Social Sciences)

‘But there is still this pressure for publication. So that is obviously something that’s always on your mind... [...] But at the same time, then this has been a part of my world throughout my research career, so it’s not something I... It’s just a normal part of the circumstances, so it is not something I think about anymore...’ (Assistant Professor, Natural Sciences)

## Discussion

As the previous sections have shown, the perception of salient identity characteristics certainly frame sensemaking processes for the academics studied here. However the identity of the formal organization – University of X or Y – plays a very minor role, and is subordinated the perception of what it means to be ‘an academic’. It seems then that the perceived threats bias the academic staff towards identification and association with a more general or professional category as the primary source of identification, i.e. selective identification and categorization (Elsbach and Kramer 1996, Hogg and Abrams 1990). Interestingly however this selective identification and categorization does not seem to be a strategy to avoid or reduce threats, i.e. by highlighting memberships to unthreatened groups or roles, as the valued characteristics are evidently seen as being under pressure. The academics do not seek to reduce the degree of dissonance felt between the perception of desired identity – what and who we should be as an organization – and the perception of construed external image – what and who others think we are as an organization. Instead they actively try to make sense of this dissonance by categorizing the disturbing elements as being irrelevant measured by salient scales, e.g. when claiming that ‘the upper levels have no idea what research

is and what it is about'. This type of categorization thus also acts as justification for certain types of responses, e.g. ignorance or decoupling.

A related tendency that emerged from the study is that the sensegiving attempt of top level management is seen as more threatening than the 'original' impulses, e.g. new public management ideas. Sensegiving, as mentioned, describes the intentional communication of a vision or plan, in a way that maximizes the possibility of success (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991), and in the present study it is clear that the sensegiving of the top level management in the two organizations is seen to be quite at odds with the frames that are used to make sense on 'production floor level'. On the other hand the department head level still seems to have a certain degree of legitimacy in terms of sensegiving; i.e. the department head may 'give the same sense' as the top level management, but since he/she is seen as a part of the academic staff/as more legitimate, they is 'excused' or protected from the negative categorizations that the top level managers are suffering. This indicates that the boundaries – or perhaps the front line, between 'us' and 'them' has moved significantly, possibly due to the massive transformations within the Danish higher education system. Where boundaries were previously drawn between institution and state, the demarcation line now seems to be constructed at the level of departments, thus linking the formal organization more with the political level than with the academic one.

This finding could prove important to discussions of whether universities are still best described as loosely coupled organizations (Weick 1976) or whether the reformation of HEIs in order to make them resemble private enterprises have resulted in more tightly coupled organizations (de Boer, Enders, and Leisyte 2007). The present study however indicates that the coupling between political system and management might be tighter – or is at least experienced by the academics as being tighter, but the coupling to the production level has become even looser.

Another aim of the study was to explore the behavioral implications of sensemaking processes and identity considerations. The analysis revealed several response strategies, ranging from no change to altered behavior. These response patterns speak to the diversity of actions that the identity constructions allow for. The literature on responding to identity threats in an organizational context have so far been primarily concerned with either organizational (collective) responses (e.g. Ravasi and Schultz 2006, Oliver 1991) or with the cognitive implications for individuals (Elsbach and Kramer 1996), but the sensemaking perspective provides a more explicit focus on how this identity work enacts a certain order back into the environment of the sensemaker, setting the premises for future actions by legitimizing certain patterns of behavior.

The study in this way, despite its small scale, contributes to the conceptualization of the dynamics of social and personal identity, by exploring how these identity construction processes lead to action – not solely to cognitive re-affirmation or alteration. Further studies are however needed to explore the conditions under which the various responses come about and the factors influencing this. The hope however is that the findings of this study might serve as a conceptual tool for such studies of the behavior of academic staff in changing organizations.

## Further questions

This study of how the academics make sense of changing circumstances and respond to their perception of threats is naturally, due to the scale, limited, but it still points to some interesting tendencies. Further studies of the conditions under which the different responses emerge would be of significant value, both to higher education professionals and scholars.

One particularly important question pertains to the matter of incentives and reward systems. The analysis revealed that some types of pressure – or some ideas – e.g. the implementation of bibliometric measures, is very likely to influence the sensemaking processes of the academic – and that this pressure seems to bypass the sensegiving attempts of the managers, even when this is more congruent with the salient identity characteristics than the new idea:

‘And then maybe your boss says that he doesn’t care so much about articles, but I have chosen to completely ignore that. It’s fine that he has that strategy, but for me... it has had a huge impact on the way I disseminate my research’ (Assistant professor, Social Sciences)

This means that even though the possibility for decoupling or ignorance is present, compliance is still opted for under certain circumstances. One possible explanation for this might be that we are seeing a movement towards a redefinition of some of the identity characteristics due to the emergence of new ideas. This would be consistent with the fact that this response was predominant in the junior staff, i.e. the ones where the institutionalized characteristics of ‘academia’ had perhaps not yet been as embedded in their personal identity, as might be the case with more senior staff. Further studies are however needed in order to explain why this is the case – and indeed dig deeper into how behavior changes. What this analysis cannot tell us is how incentives and rewards impact this behavioral change – if at all.

Along the same line, the findings point to the importance of looking more closely at the complex construction that is ‘the academic identity’ (cf. Henkel 2000; Ylijoki and Ursin 2013). As the analysis revealed the academics would rather struggle to make sense of “being an academic” than change the perception of self to a more un-contested and unproblematic identity construction. On the other hand the performance management systems seem to have a transformational effect on the identity of particularly younger researchers. This highlights that there are several dynamics at work in the identity constructions of ‘production floor academics’ and further research into these processes would be very valuable, both to policy makers, higher education management and scholars of academic practice.

## References

- Aagaard, K., and N. Mejlgaard, eds. 2012. *Dansk forskningspolitik efter årtusindskiftet* [Danish research policy in the new millennium]. Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag.
- Albert, S., and D. Whetten. 1985. Organizational identity. In *Research in organizational behaviour*, Vol. 7, eds. L.L. Cummings and B.M. Staw, 263–95. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

- Albert, S., B.E. Ashforth, and J.E. Dutton. 2000. Organizational identity and identification: Charting new waters and building new bridges, *Academy of Management Review* 25: 13–17.
- Alderfer, C. P., and K. K. Smith. 1982. Studying intergroup relations embedded in organizations, *Administrative Science Quarterly* 27, no. 1: 35-65.
- Ashforth, B.E. and Mael, F. 1989. Social Identity Theory and the Organization, *The Academy of Management Review* 14, no. 1: 20-39.
- Bernstein, B. 1996. *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity: Theory, Research, Critique*. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Brunsson, N. 1986. Organizing for inconsistencies: on organizational conflict, depression and hypocrisy as substitutes for action, *Scandinavian Journal of Management Studies* 2, no 3: 165-185.
- De Boer, H. F., J. Enders, and L. Leisyte. 2007. Public sector reform in Dutch higher education: The organizational transformation of the university, *Public Administration* 85, no. 1: 27-46.
- Deem, R. 2004. The Knowledge Worker, the Manager-academic and the Contemporary UK University: New and Old Forms of Public Management? *Financial Accountability & Management* 20, no 2: 107–128.
- Deem, R., M. Reed, and S. Hillyard. 2007. *Knowledge, Higher Education, and the New Managerialism: The Changing Management of UK Universities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dutton, J.E. and J.M. Dukerich. 1991. Keeping an Eye on the Mirror: Image and Identity in Organizational Adaptation, *The Academy of Management Journal* 34, no. 3: 517-554.
- Elsbach, K.D. and R.M. Kramer. 1996. Members' responses to organizational identity threats: Encountering and countering the Business Week rankings, *Administrative Science Quarterly* 41: 442–76.
- Etzkowitz, H., and L. Leydesdorff. 2000. The dynamics of innovation: from National Systems and “Mode 2” to a Triple Helix of university–industry–government relations, *Research policy* 29, no. 2: 109-123.
- Flyvbjerg, B. 2006. Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative inquiry* 12, no. 2: 219-245.
- Gioia, D.A. and K. Chittipeddi. 1991. Sensemaking and sensegiving in strategic change initiation, *Strategic Management Journal* 12: 433-448.
- Gioia, D.A. and J.B. Thomas. 1996. Identity, Image, and Issue Interpretation: Sensemaking During Strategic Change in Academia, *Administrative Science Quarterly* 41, no. 3: 370-403.
- Gioia, D. A., M. Schultz, and K.G. Corley. 2000. Organizational identity, image, and adaptive instability, *Academy of management Review* 25, no. 1: 63-81.
- Glaser, B., and A. Strauss. 1967. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Gornitzka, Å., and P. Maassen. 2000. National policies concerning the economic role of higher education, *Higher Education Policy* 13, no. 3: 225–230.
- Henkel, M. 2000. *Academic Identities and Policy Change in Higher Education*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

- Henkel, M. 2004. Current science policies and their implications for the formation and maintenance of academic identity, *Higher Education Policy* 17, no. 2: 167-182.
- Henkel, M. 2005. Academic identity and autonomy in a changing policy environment, *Higher Education* 49, no. 1-2: 155-176.
- Hogg, M. A., and D. Abrams. 1990. Social motivation, self-esteem and social identity. In *Social identity theory: Constructive and critical advances*, eds. M.A. Hoggs and D. Abrams, 28-47. New York, NY, US: Springer-Verlag Publishing
- Kogan, M., M. Bauer, I. Bleiklie, and M. Henkel. 2000. *Transforming Higher Education. A Comparative Study*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Mills, J. H. 2003. *Making sense of Organizational Change*. New York: Routledge.
- Mills, J.H., A. Thurlow, and A.J. Mills. 2010. Making sense of sensemaking: the critical sensemaking approach, *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal* 5, no. 2: 182–195.
- Oliver, C. 1991. Strategic Responses to Institutional Processes, *Academy of Management Review* 16, no. 1: 145-179.
- Olsen, J. P. 2005. *The institutional dynamics of the (European) University*. Oslo: ARENA – Centre for European Studies, University of Oslo.
- Ravasi, D., and M. Schultz. 2006. Responding to organizational identity threats: Exploring the role of organizational culture, *Academy of Management Journal* 49, no. 3: 433-458.
- Smerek, R.E. 2011. Sensemaking and Sensegiving: An Exploratory Study of the Simultaneous “Being and Learning” of New College and University Presidents, *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies* 18, no. 1: 80-94.
- Taylor, C. 1989. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Van Maanen, J., and S.R. Barley. 1984. Occupational communities: Culture and control in organizations. In *Research in organizational behaviour, Vol. 6*, eds. B.M. Staw and L.L. Cummings, 287-365. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Weick, K. E. 1976. Educational organizations as loosely coupled systems, *Administrative science quarterly* 21, no. 1: 1-19.
- Weick, K.E. 1995. *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Weick, K. E., K. Sutcliffe, and D. Obstfeld. 2005. Organizing and the Process of Sense-making, *Organization Science* 16, no 4: 409-421.
- Ylijoki, O., and J. Ursin. 2013. The construction of academic identity in the changes of Finnish higher education, *Studies in Higher Education* 38, no. 8: 1135-1149.



## Chapter 9: Addressing the theoretical and empirical contributions

In this chapter I will sum up central findings from the individual sub-studies and discuss how they contribute to answering the overall research question: *How do ideas move into and through Danish higher education institutions, and what are the implications for sensemaking and action?* This overall question was in the introductory chapter divided into sub-questions, which has guided the research process and formed the basis of the 5 articles of the dissertation. The aim in this concluding chapter is to provide a cross-section and cross-comparison of the findings from the individual sub-studies, in order to draw out more general conclusions and point to interesting points for further studies. Additionally the applicability and contributions of the theoretical framework will be discussed.

### 9.1 Travelling and transformational ideas

The questions of how ideas move, how they transform the context they encounter, and how they are themselves transformed by way of this encounter are vital if we wish to understand how policies come about, are implemented and potentially influence the practice they aim at altering. Ideas are abundant in political life, and the current debate over the role and function of universities in society highlights that ideas are far from neutral or free-flowing; they are carried forth by powerful actors, e.g. the EC, national governments, powerful NGOs and the like. They can thereby also come to function as powerful frames for action, as they promote problem definitions and plausible solutions to such problems; definitions that are often translated into reforms of higher education systems. On the other hand, frames do not equate action, and translating an idea into policy does not guarantee that the desired behavior comes about. The context and agency are thereby seen as crucial constructs when attempting to understand how ideas lead to change – if at all.

The present project has attempted to explore the transformational power of ideas and the limits of transformation; exploring the dynamics between transformation, agency, and structure by providing an in-depth analysis and investigation of the context in which ideas emerge and the factors that influence this emergence. In the following sections I will discuss how the findings

of the individual studies collectively illuminate the dynamics of travelling ideas and thus attempt to illustrate how the project attempts to answer the overall research question. The value and implications of the project and findings as a whole are highlighted and discussed in the concluding sections of this chapter.

The issue of how ideas move and transform has in the project been approached from different perspectives, i.e. both from the perspectives of the university managers and academic staff whose behavior is expected to change, and from the perspective of national policy where ideas 'enter' the system. The latter perspective was explored in chapter 4, where it was demonstrated how the ideas about universities, higher education in general, and their role and function in society which are dominant in the discourse of today are far from new. The study illuminates how the ideas about strategy, accountability etc., which are very prevalent in the present debate and discourse concerning universities and higher education, have evolved and been influenced by older notions since the 1960s, where the translation of e.g. ideas about governability aided in the political construction of higher education as a "*system-to-be-governed*" and thereby a legitimate object of governance. The sub-study illustrated how the translation of ideas incrementally changed the problem definitions surrounding higher education and the appropriate policy solutions; a process which over time amounted to a significantly transformed perception of the role and function of higher education institutions. This finding thereby emphasizes the potency of the ideational perspective in terms of describing and conceptualizing change. Where new institutional theory has struggled with the observation that things and perceptions change, ideational institutionalism takes this as its starting point and assumes that ideas work as transformational forces. This leads to two central questions, relevant both to the particular empirical case in question here, but also to the ideational framework in general, namely: in what way are ideas transformational and what can the present study tell us about how and what they transform?

What the project overall argues is that ideas are not transformational by definition; they become transformational as they are translated and enacted. The enactment of ideas functions as "*third-order controls*" (Weick 1995) or decision premises, which act as implicit foundations for future decisions (Luhmann 2000; Simon 1957). In other words the translation of a particular (set of) idea(s) enacts a certain 'reality', which then calls for or legitimizes certain types of actions. This means that if an idea is not translated, it cannot be seen as transformational as it cannot serve as the foundation for decisions or



actions. If ideas are not noticed, bracketed and made sense of, they remain in the flux of unintelligible information; the sense that might have been.

Ideas are thereby *potentially* transformational, and the question becomes when and how this occurs. The present research project has naturally not provided a full answer to this question, but has pointed out a number of dynamics, which influence the transformational potential of ideas about higher education and universities. The management sensemaking studies (chapters 5-7) demonstrate how ideas become transformational when they are linked with personal frames, as was e.g. seen in the top level managers' sensemaking and sensegiving processes. Here new ideas about strategy, accountability and competitiveness impacted goal setting, but particularly the one that functioned as sensegiving rather than sensemaking. The goal constructions that are influenced by new ideas are rarely operationalized into specific courses of action or initiatives, but remain part of a non-specific discourse, which does not bind the managers to certain actions. In other words, these types of goal setting act as *sensegiving facilitators*, by enabling the construction of a viable story that the top level managers tell in order to influence the sensemaking of others. However, when ideas are translated and connected with a personal frame, they become transformational in that they enact a social order which entails certain actions. In the case of the top level managers, the personalized strategic goals are linked to the identity needs for self-enhancement, self-efficacy and self-consistency and thus built in to the narrative of self, which to a much higher degree 'obligates' action.

The same conclusion can be drawn from the department head studies (chapters 6 and 7), which, by way of the construction of the department head typology, highlights the dynamics that influence how ideas are 'allowed' to be transformational. The three types 'allow for transformation' in very different ways: On the one end, the shielder type tends to construct new ideas and translations as disruptive and unwarranted, which leads to dismissal and often to decoupling or ignorance, i.e. to a continuation (to the furthest extent possible) of existing practice. New ideas are in other words not 'permitted' to act as transformational forces, even though they have the potential to do so within the same system – or even the same organization, as is seen at the other end of the spectrum. The agenda setter type tends to extract new ideas about higher education governance and management as salient cues in the sensemaking process and connect them with their personal frames, which leads to what could be called a transformational pattern of behavior.

However, a clear-cut 'causal' connection between ideas that are connected with a personal frame and transformational behavior does not seem

evident. The sub-study in chapter 7 demonstrated that the coordinator type department head exhibits a 'schizophrenic' approach to sensemaking, where new ideas about management are sought integrated into the identity construction, while an academic frame is emphasized. This 'schizophrenia' can be seen as a conflict between the social and the personal identity, and between the frames that are deemed relevant in the constructions of them. Where the construction of social identity of the coordinator type is defined in terms of academic identification, it seems that the personal identity is influenced increasingly by newer ideas about professional management. This suggests a more complex dynamic relation between transformational capacity, sensemaking and context, and points out the need to look closer at the identity constructions of individuals (and organizations) through sense-making, which may be seen as a key component in the transformational power of ideas.

## 9.2 Identity and identification

The transformational potential of ideas is in other words seen to be highly influenced by the dynamics of identity construction, and the personal and social categorizations. The process of identity construction through sensemaking does not play out in a vacuum; a central assumption of the present project has namely been that the context – academia and higher education institutions – is vitally important when studying identity, as the cognitive frames that are used to make sense are constituted by “*institutional systems, routines and scripts*” (Mills 2003). Such routines, norms and scripts are seen as particularly strong in highly institutionalized organizations such as universities. Many scholars have highlighted the importance of academic values (e.g. Henkel 1997; 2000; 2005; Deem 2004; Deem et al. 2007) and the present study has explored and demonstrated various ways in which academic values act as a constraint or as a facilitator. In chapter 4 the academic or Humboldtian idea network that comprises e.g. ideas about collegiality, academic freedom, institutional freedom etc., was seen to significantly impact policy translations, but as the sensemaking studies have shown (chapters 5-8), the normative and cognitive values of academia are important factors in the sensemaking processes on the organizational and individual levels as well.

Academic values and ideas can be seen to evoke a certain set of expectations, which in many cases run counter to the demands of the *formal* position of manager. This would be the starting point of sociological or historical new institutionalists, whose assumption is that institutions are either normative constraints pushing organizations towards isomorphism, or historically

determined and determining, thus fostering path dependence. A vital finding in the present study however is, that the *translation of the individual manager* can be seen as vital part of determining whether or not these expectations are deemed relevant and salient, or if they are 'bypassed' in the sensemaking processes. If academic values and norms are perceived to be the most relevant frames, or perhaps more accurately if contending frames are not perceived as relevant enough to compete with or supplement the academic frames, these academic norms and values act as constraints on the space for meaning that is available to the individual manager, as would also be expected by sociological and historical institutionalists.

As the typology indicated academic norms and values may therefore also be described as liberating or at least as complexity reducing, in that they offer a source of positive identification; a category, which is readily available to the sensemaker, and thereby enables the individual to continue acting, albeit in a path dependent way. This form is especially visible with the shielder type department head, and similarly in the case of agenda setters, academic frames are discarded and constructed as not-relevant in the identity construction, which also enables action – often in a transformational way. Where the notion of constraint – in the negative form – seems relevant, is in the case of the coordinator, where the academic frame is seen as relevant only to a certain extent, i.e. in the construction of social identity, whereas new ideas and the frames that they propose are also seen as relevant in the construction of personal identity. As illustrated in chapter 7, unequivocal identification tends to be less problematic than the attempt to construct a new category to identify with. This highlights an element, which has been perhaps slightly under-illuminated in the project, namely identification.

### 9.2.1 Identification – group, organization or discipline?

Identity has been a central and explicit concept in chapters 5-7, but not until chapter 8 was identification as a concept brought to the fore. It may be argued that identification is implicitly analyzed in the other sub-studies, and indeed that it is a central, if not explicit, part of the analytical framework as such, but this only emphasizes the need to bring the concept into focus and discuss how it may illuminate some of the processes and dynamics investigated in the study as a whole.

Social identification can be seen as "*the perception of oneness with or belongingness to some human aggregate*" (Ashforth and Mael 1989, 21), i.e. social categories or groups, and it thereby concerned with the dynamic relationship between individual and collective. Following this definition, the

sensemaking studies (chapters 5-7) can also be seen as studies of identification processes, as they explored how the university managers related to various categories, e.g. academics and managers. An interesting case of social identification is seen in chapter 5, where top level managers perceived, or at least expressed, a sense of oneness with the academic group by highlighting academic values and norms in their construction of self-consistency. Social identification in this case became a part of both an introvert sensemaking process, as well as an extrovert sensegiving exercise, in that the perception of belongingness was used as a means of legitimizing one's position to the former peers. Social identification thereby constructed a sense of belonging (strengthening self-consistency), both to the top level managers themselves and to the audience that they attempted to legitimize themselves to.

The department head studies (chapters 6 and 7) demonstrates how identification differs across department head types, i.e. how the shielder type identify to a much higher degree with the academic staff than the other types. This finding brings questions to the fore that have emerged during the course of the research project, namely which group is the primary source of identification and what are the factors that drive or direct such identification? Classic identification theorists emphasize that:

(t)here is a natural tendency for individuals to identify with, and attribute legitimacy to, the work organizations in which they participate, as a result of rational calculations of self-interest (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978), an assumed congruence between their notions of what is 'right' and 'good', and key features and consequences of the organization (Aldrich and Fiol 1994), and because work organizations offer meaningful explanations for anxiety-provoking experiences that reduce dissonance (Suchman 1995). At a deeper psychological level, in defining the social identity component of their self-concepts, individuals tend to draw on the salient images they associate with their work organization (Dutton et al. 1994; Elsbach 1999) (Humphreys and Brown 2002).

However, as Humphreys and Brown go on to note, this picture is a simplified one and there may be many different ways of (not) identifying with one's work organization. Similarly, other studies have indicated that the formal organization in a higher education context may be losing significance as a source of identification (Moscati 2008; Henkel 2000), and that academics tend to be more loyal to the discipline or the subject than to the organization as a whole (Deem 2004).

Viewed through these lenses, the present project indicates that there is indeed not only one way of identifying, but also highlights that social identifi-

cation hinges on more than simply classic notions of academic loyalty. The department head studies found that when managers experience a clear and recognizable organizational narrative or identity, they tend to identify positively with it. Without such a clear picture of 'who we are as an organization', the organization disappears from the identity constructions, a case of what could be called "*neutral identification*" (Elsbach 1999; Humphreys and Brown 2002). However, this only applies to two of the three department head types (the coordinator and the agenda setter), indicating that the dynamic is more complex.

Organizational identification is thereby not simply a matter of constructing a recognizable story of the organization's identity; competing sources of identification must also be taken into account. The present study has shown that the shielder type department head tends to identify more with the discipline and the academic community than with the organization, whereas the coordinator and agenda setter types use the organizational identity actively in their own identity construction and thereby tend to value the competing sources of identification less. Naturally such dynamics deserve closer studies, but the findings do suggest that sensegivers, e.g. strategic managers, as well as scholars who study change processes in universities, ought to consider how organizational identity is constructed and not least made sense of among organization members, as these dynamics are much more complex than they are often assumed. In relation to the present research project, the concept of social identification certainly adds to the understanding of the overall problem of the study by nuancing the dynamics that shape the translation of ideas and sensemaking within organizations.

### 9.3 Theoretical contributions

In addition to discussing how the sub-studies contributed to illuminate the general research question, the present chapter also aimed at outlining the theoretical contributions of the project. Two points are seen to be particularly worthy of elaboration, namely the development of the department head typology and the applicability of the overall theoretical framework.

#### 9.3.1. The typology – a framework for further analysis

A central contribution of the research project, which has already been brought forth several times in the present chapter, is the typology of department heads (chapters 6 and 7). The typology was developed from the narratives of the department heads, from which three stereotypical categories of

'being a department head' in a Danish university were constructed (see section 3.4.4 and chapters 6 and 7 for a description of the development). The typology does not represent an attempt to impose certain labels or categories on the individual informants in the department head studies, but represents an analytical construction of abstract categories, with which university department heads at different times – and under different circumstances – could be described. The argument is that department heads will in general display characteristics of one or more of the three types, but that they will tend to lean more towards one type.

Theoretically, the typology contributes by serving as a heuristic, or a way of thinking about manager sensemaking in complex organizations. It means to reduce complexity by introducing selected attributes and dimensions by which these attributes may be understood, and it may thereby also be a useful interpretive framework for understanding other aspects of organizational change. The discussion above concerning social identification indicated that the typology might be a valuable tool when looking at how the organizational identity is perceived, and how it relates to perceptions of personal and social identity. Or it may be used as *“as a starting point in further studies of identity construction processes in HEIs in times of reform, as it indicates factors that might explain variations both across and inside specific institutions”*, as suggested in article 4. The typology thereby serves the conceptual goal of the research project mentioned in section 3.3, namely to build frameworks that might inform future studies of similar contexts.

The typology also holds interesting perspectives when applied to the data and findings of the other sub-studies in the present project. In chapter 5 the sensemaking and sensegiving processes of top level managers were explored and discussed in terms of the increasing demand for strategic management in higher education. Viewed through the lens of the typology, it is clear – and perhaps unsurprising for some – that most of the top level managers could be described as agenda setters, displaying a negative valuation of the past and a clear ambition for the organization that they are in charge of, illustrated by the analysis of goal setting. This agenda setter type sensemaking is also reflected in the way self-consistency is constructed, i.e. by referring to the academic background as a prerequisite for being in their present position, but at the same time clearly emphasizing cues that differentiate them from academia and from their previous peers; a sensemaking pattern which is common for both the top level managers and for the agenda setter type department head. This would support the idea that top level managers predominantly see themselves as 'entrepreneurial' and ambitious individuals, who actively seek out higher level positions. This might indicate

that the agenda setter type is an 'easier fit' for higher level managers, than for managers in the 'production room', where only a few could be said to lean most towards this type. The finding of the studies in chapters 6 and 7 however suggested that experienced department heads tended to display more shielder-type characteristics in their sensemaking; a tendency that should thus also be expected among top level managers, who have all been 'in the system' for a number of years due to the requirement set by Danish law that rectors and deans should be experienced managers as well as recognized academics. A possible explanation for this conflicting tendency could be that managers in the top tiers perceive a greater distance – cognitive as well as physical – from their previous research environment and from previous peers, thus making the cues and frames of academia less salient, even if they are by no means absent. Applying the typology on other levels of management thereby seems to highlight different dynamics and further studies of top level managers, and indeed managers at other levels and in other organizations, would in this way aid in the continuing conceptualization of the typology.

The perspective of the typology also highlights interesting tendencies in the data from the focus groups. When the typology is applied as a framework here, it illuminates an interesting perspective on the type of manager that academics value, and thereby which features of management are perceived as important and salient in a university context. Interestingly, the focus group study indicate two somewhat conflicting tendencies, namely that the propensity of the top level management – and to some extent the department heads – to evoke and draw on academic frames and cues in their sensegiving, seems to foster resistance and suspicion amongst academic staff, as it is perceived as 'betrayal' or as condescending:

And (...) it would almost be better if the dean can't and doesn't use that academic [rationale]. It would almost be better to have someone who is a professional manager and can build organizations and structures that actually work. I mean, because this becomes the worst of both worlds. In that way an increased professionalization of management in this place would be a good thing [laughter] (Junior academic, Humanities)

This perception of getting "*the worst of both worlds*" is quite common in the narratives from the focus group interviews with academic staff; a construction that is connected with an also common perception of top level managers as distant, managerial and decoupled from academic practice. Several academics explicitly state that having 'real', professional managers would

be better. However the academic values are highlighted as important characteristics of the managers at department head level:

But he tries to be a department head as he was in the old days... to be everywhere, and to listen to people.

And that's it, a department head needs to know his people. There shouldn't more people, than he... knows who... knows their story (Two senior academics, Humanities).

This dual expectation, i.e. that there is a perceived need for professional management, while academic values are still emphasized, points to some interesting arenas for further research, particularly on how widespread these dual demands and expectations are in academia – and how they influence the relationship between the manager and the managed.

### 9.3.2 Applicability of the theoretical framework

As described in chapter 2 an independent aim of the present project was to develop and apply a theoretical framework with an eye for both continuity and change in complex organizations, as well as for both the micro-processes of organizational sensemaking and the contextual transformations that influence this. The framework described in chapter 2 has proven useful in the analysis of higher education institutions, particularly in terms of the illustrating how individuals author their own reality in the face of changing environments, which in turn affects the direction of future translations and ideational development.

The discussion above about the transformational power of ideas has also illuminated the potential of the framework, as it has demonstrated how issues of identity and sensemaking processes are critically important when looking at how ideas become transformational and thereby impact behavior. The integration of the ideational perspective, translation, and sensemaking in a common framework is thereby seen as strengthening the individual perspectives significantly by shedding light on each other's blind spots. The common framework is seen as holding great potential in studies of complex organizations, where traditional causal explanations might fail, or at least fail to grasp the depth of the dynamics in play.

The framework, however, naturally also has its limitations, particularly in terms of the possibilities for providing generalizable explanations, and thus predicting behavior or outcome. The strength of the framework is thereby also its weakness: by being open to the importance and salience of multiple



factors, which may impact how ideas influence organizational perceptions and behavior, the opportunity to assess the relative importance of these factors *a priori* is lost. Such an assessment must thereby take place in the analytical process; where theory meets the empirical data.

In the specific application of the framework on the present case, predictability however seems difficult to obtain under any circumstance. The Danish system and the individual institutions can be seen to be in a situation of continual renegotiation and flux, where ideas are abundant and translations even more so. As mentioned in chapter 3, the case selection strategy of the study was 'disturbed' by a major organizational change process in one of the case universities – a situation which describes the situation in Danish higher education policy and institutions well. The specific application of the framework therefore further illustrates the difficulties of being able to generalize in the classic sense, as the framework is by definition context-dependent. However when dealing with complex organizations and political processes, the in-depth and context-specific perspective offered by the theoretical framework developed here, provides valuable knowledge about exactly the dynamics of this complexity, which may then serve as both a foundation for critical (self)reflection as well as a stepping stone for further research.

## 9.4 Perspectives for future research

The discussions above – and the articles of this dissertation in general, have highlighted several areas where further research is appropriate. Particularly the issue of identification; what groups are most attractive to identify with in higher education institutions, seem to be an obviously important research arena. Several scholars have investigated attempts of constructing and changing organizational identity in higher education institutions and the dynamics of academic identity (e.g. Välimaa 1995; Stensaker 2004; Henkel 2000; Deem 2004), but the intra-organizational dynamics and competing sources of identification are more scarcely studied (see Humphreys and Brown 2002 for a notable exception). The findings of this project and the discussions above indicate that more in-depth as well as broader studies of the way the organization emerges in the sensemaking processes of both managers and academics are needed, particularly focusing on the degree to which this is dependent on discipline, position in the academic hierarchy, type of organization etc., if we are to gain an understanding of academic identity that goes beyond institutionalized perceptions of loyalty and assumptions of path dependency or isomorphism. Similarly, an area, which deserves more careful attention than it has been awarded in the present pro-

ject, is the sensemaking processes of academic staff. The small scale study in chapter 8 pointed to several interesting tendencies, particularly in relation to the response strategies of academic staff in the face of identity threats. Investigating how these responses come about, and the circumstances under which they are more likely, would provide valuable knowledge about the impact of management and of higher education reform in general. Such knowledge would, apart from being a valuable tool for policy makers in the design of reforms of higher education institutions, also serve as a tool for academics in order for them to become reflexive on their own practice and when this practice could be different.

## 9.5 The structural conditions of managers – policy implications

The present project was never meant to be prescriptive or normative in the sense that it specifically aimed at constructing recommendations for future policy development. However, to round off this concluding discussion it seems appropriate to highlight a few lessons that might be drawn from the project about the relationship between the managers, which have to some extent taken center stage in the dissertation, and their environment. These lessons may inspire critical reflection on the conditions of university managers in times of reform – and perhaps give food for thought on how these conditions are framed by structural elements.

As mentioned earlier in this discussion, university managers in Denmark are required by law to be recognized academics, and the studies have shown that this background serves as a vital factor in their sensemaking and sensegiving processes. There seems to be general consensus that having an academic background is necessary and desirable in order to maintain legitimacy. However, as the focus group study indicated, academics seem to be less than sympathetic to the use and projection of academic values by managers, particularly in the top levels. Top level managers are often accused of having forgotten ‘what research and teaching is all about’, but as the studies have indicated this is not necessarily the case. A possible explanation for this may be the academic background might obscure the need for co-determination and consultation, which is otherwise seen as highly relevant in the relation between manager and highly skilled professionals such as academics. Because the managers see themselves as ‘academic persons’, they will naturally tend to find it less necessary to consult, debate or ‘be curious’ about the academic practice, because they have themselves lived

the life – they know what is at stake. However if differing perceptions of ‘what it takes to be an academic’ are not reflected upon, it may lead to misunderstandings and lack of communication. The structural conditions of the managers, i.e. the demand for a background in academia, may thereby be a hindrance to managers in terms of the very relationship that the demand was meant to improve. The demand for academic credentials may thus be a double-edged sword to the managers, as it is clearly seen as necessary to uphold a certain amount of legitimacy (even if this is not necessarily perceived the same way by the academic staff), but it also may cause blind spots in the managers’ practice.

Another related challenge concerns the career perspective, i.e. the possibilities of returning to ‘active duty’ in academia after having held a management position. Almost all department heads mentioned how the time as a manager weakens the possibility of returning to a career as a researcher, e.g. because your academic production naturally grinds to a halt while being a manager, leaving a hole in the resume. Similarly it was mentioned many times that the time away from research both erodes your research networks, hampering the chances of obtaining external funding grants as part of collective projects, and leaves one’s knowledge of the contemporary developments in the research field somewhat wanting. One might therefore speculate that the position of university manager in the long run might attract academics in the latter stages of their career, or only candidates with ambitions to move up the managerial ladder. Both of these scenarios pose obvious problems, and at the very least the present research project might inspire policy makers and university managers alike to reflect upon the conditions that are offered to the managers, particularly at department head level, in order to understand the implications for recruitment. This emphasizes the need for careful consideration of the regulation of the internal management structures in universities, and the difficulties that are inherent in attempting to change strong academic norms without eroding them.



## English summary

The present dissertation investigates how new ideas about the role and function of universities are perceived and translated into policy and practice. Universities and higher education in general are in the present years undergoing massive transformations, both in terms of their institutional and organizational frames, but also in terms of the demands that are put on them to be accountable, responsive to society and competitive in the global economy. Demands and ideas, however, do not necessarily equate action, and universities, being one of the oldest institutions still in existence, are often described as highly stable and institutionalized organizations, with a strong set of internal logics and values that are not easily transformed by the emergence of new ideas.

The dissertation explores how these new and old ideas about what a university is and should be are balanced when they meet – both in policy developments, but not least within the individual universities. Ideas are seen as drivers and catalysts of sensemaking, i.e. the processes wherein individuals and organizations attempt to organize the continual flux of information and input they face in times of complexity. The ways in which ideas are translated and made sense of as they travel through the Danish university system are explored; from the way central ideas are translated in higher education policies over time and to the way new ideas influence the creation of meaning and identities by Danish university managers and academics.

Specifically, the research project addresses when and how ideas become transformational; when they bring about a change and when they do not. The university manager role, and particularly the role of department head, is seen as a nexus for new and old ideas, as these management roles are still occupied by recognized academics with a vast portfolio of new management tasks. The project investigates how the roles of manager and academic are balanced and with what consequences for practice, as well as how these new management roles are perceived by the academics ‘on the production floor’.

Overall, the project demonstrates how the transformational power of ideas is dependent on how they are translated and make sense of. It is demonstrated how policy translations of central ideas have brought about significant change over time in the perception of the role and function of the universities. In terms of intra-organizational processes, several dynamics of translation and sensemaking are explored. At department head level, a conceptual framework is developed which highlights three different types of be-

ing a department head, with different characteristics and with three different legitimate patterns of action. These three types differ in their perceptions of identity, their relations to the academic staff and in their behavior, ranging from decoupling to active change behavior.

In the top tier of university management, the study shows that academic values are still very important, both to the self-image and to the image that the top level managers want to project. This self-image is also seen to be highly influential on the goals that are set and the strategies that are produced. Finally the study has pointed at some interesting tendencies at the 'production floor' where ideas – and particularly the translation of ideas made by managers, were seen to be very influential. It seems that the university as an organization, is used very scarcely as a source of identification, but that the translations and sensegiving of top level (and lower level) management is seen as threatening to the perceptions of identity – threats that lead to very diverse responses.

In general the study demonstrates and investigates the complex connections between ideas, translation, sensemaking and identity construction, and thus sheds light on the complex path from idea to action.

## Dansk resumé

Denne afhandling fokuserer på hvordan nye idéer omkring universiteternes rolle og funktion i samfundet opfattes og oversættes i policy og praksis. Universiteterne og det videregående uddannelsessystem generelt har i de seneste år gennemgået massive transformationer, både i forhold til deres institutionelle og organisatoriske rammer, men også i forhold til de krav som stilles til dem om (økonomisk) ansvarlighed, responsivitet og konkurrencedygtighed i den globale økonomi. Krav og idéer er dog ikke lig med handling, og eftersom universitetet som institution stadig eksisterer i mere eller mindre samme form som for 800 år siden, kan det med rette beskrives som en særdeles stabil og institutionaliseret organisation, med særegne og meget stærke logikker og værdier, som ikke let forandres.

Afhandlingen udforsker hvordan disse nye og gamle idéer om hvad universitetet er og skal være balanceres når de mødes – både i udviklingen af policy, men ikke mindst internt på de enkelte universiteter. Idéer ses dermed som katalysatorer for sensemaking (meningsskabelse), forstået som de processer hvori individer og organisationer søger at organisere det kontinuerlige flow af information og input, som de mødes med i komplekse omgivelser. Forskningsprojektet undersøger måderne hvorpå idéer oversættes og gives mening mens de rejser gennem det danske universitetssystem; fra den måde centrale idéer oversættes i universitetspolitik over tid, til de måder nye idéer influerer skabelsen af mening og identitet hos danske universitetsledere og forskere.

Mere specifikt undersøges det hvordan og hvornår idéer kan siges at være transformerende; hvornår de tilvejebringer forandring og hvornår de ikke gør. Projektet demonstrerer hvordan policy oversættelser af centrale idéer over tid har medført væsentlige inkrementelle forandringer i hvordan universiteternes rolle og funktion opfattes. Mht. intra-organisatoriske dynamikker, illustrerer projektet en række interessante processer vedrørende sensemaking og oversættelse. Universitetslederrollen, og særligt rollen som institutleder, ses som en nexus for nye og gamle idéer, da disse roller stadig besættes af anerkendte forskere, som efterfølgende får ansvaret for en lang række mere klassiske ledelsesopgaver. Forskningsprojektet undersøger hvordan disse roller som leder og akademiker balanceres og hvilke konsekvenser dette har for praksis. Ligeledes udforskes det hvordan de nye ledelsesroller opfattes på 'produktionsniveauet'.

Overordnet set demonstrerer projektet hvordan idéers transformative potentiale er afhængigt af hvordan de oversættes og skabes mening omkring.

På institutlederniveau udvikles en konceptuel ramme, som illustrerer at der ses tre forskellige typer af institutledere med forskellige karakteristika og med tre forskellige legitime handlemønstre. Disse tre typer adskiller sig blandt andet ved deres opfattelser af identitet, relationer og identifikation med det akademiske miljø på instituttet og ved deres adfærd, som spænder fra de-kobling til aktivt 'forandrende' adfærd.

På topledelsesniveau viser projektet at akademiske værdier stadig spiller en stor rolle, både i konstruktionen af selv-billede og af det billede som topledere gerne vil vise udadtil. Disse selv-billeder (identiteter) er også vigtige i forhold til den strategiske ledelse og opsætningen af mål.

Projektet har ligeledes udpeget en række interessante tendenser på 'produktionsniveau'; blandt akademikere, hvor idéer og særligt de oversættelser af idéer som stammer fra de øvre ledelseslag er meget indflydelsesrige. Blandt andet viser studiet at universitetet som organisation spiller en meget lille rolle som kilde til identifikation, men at oversættelserne og meningsgivelsen fra topledelsen (og i nogen grad mellemlidelsen) opfattes som værende en trussel mod perceptionen af identitet – oplevede trusler som fører til meget varierende adfærd blandt akademikerne.

Generelt demonstrerer og udforsker projektet de dynamiske og komplekse sammenhænge der kan identificeres mellem idéer, oversættelse, sensemaking og identitet, og kaster dermed lys over den snoede sti fra idé til handling.



## References

- Aagaard, K. (2011). *Kampen om basismidlerne: Historisk institutionel analyse af basisbevillingsmodellens udvikling på universitetsområdet i Danmark* [The battle for basic funding: A historical institutionalist analysis of the evolution of the university basic funding system in Denmark]. PhD dissertation. Aarhus: Danish Centre for Studies in Research and Research Policy, Aarhus University.
- Aagaard, K., and Mejlgaard, N. (eds.) (2012). *Dansk forskningspolitik efter årtusindskiftet* [Danish research policy in the new millennium]. Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag.
- Aalborg University 1. Aalborg University website. <[www.aau.dk](http://www.aau.dk)>
- Aalborg University 2. Aalborg University website (Esbjerg Campus). <<http://www.en.esbjerg.aau.dk/Education/>>
- Aarhus University 1: Aarhus University website. <[www.au.dk](http://www.au.dk)>
- Aarhus University 2. Aarhus University website (administrative change process). <<http://www.au.dk/strategi/admforandring/organisering/>>
- Albæk, J. (2009). *Forestillinger om kvalitet og tværfaglighed på sygehuse* [Ideas about quality and interdisciplinarity in hospitals]. PhD dissertation. Copenhagen: Doctoral School of Organisation and Management Studies, CBS.
- Albert, S., and Whetten, D. (1985). Organizational identity. In L.L. Cummings and B.M. Staw (eds.), *Research in organizational behaviour, Vol. 7* (pp. 263–95). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Albert, S., Ashforth, B.E. and Dutton, J.E. (2000). Organizational identity and identification: Charting new waters and building new bridges. *Academy of Management Review*, 25, 13–17.
- Alderfer, C. P., and Smith, K.K. (1982). Studying intergroup relations embedded in organizations. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 27(1), 35-65.
- Alvesson, M. (2003). Methodology for close up studies—struggling with closeness and closure. *Higher Education*, 46(2), 167-193.
- Amaral, A., and Magalhães, A. (2004). Epidemiology and the Bologna saga. *Higher Education*, 48(1), 79-100.
- Amaral, A., Jones, G.A. and Karseth, B. (eds.) (2003). *Governing Higher Education: National Perspectives on Institutional Governance*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Amaral, A., Meek, V.L., and Larsen, I. M. (eds.) (2002). *The Higher Education Managerial Revolution?* Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Andersen, N. Å. (2003). Discursive Analytical Strategies: Understanding Foucault, Koselleck, Laclau, Luhmann. The Policy Press.
- Andersen, N.Å. and Thygesen, N.T. (2004). Styring af styringsværktøjer [Steering the steering tools], *Nordisk Administrativt Tidsskrift*, 85(1), 28-37.
- Argyris, C. (1971). *Management and Organizational Development: the Path from XA to YB*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

- Ashforth, B. E. and Mael, F. (1989). Social identity theory and the organisation. *Academy of Management Review*, 14(1), 20-39.
- Bargh, C., Boccock, J., Scott, P. and Smith, D. (2000). *University Leadership, The Role of the Chief Executive*. Buckingham: SRHE and Open University Press.
- Bartunek, J.M., Krim, R.M., Necochea, R., and Humphries, M. (1999). Sensemaking, sensegiving, and leadership in strategic organizational development. *Advances in Qualitative Organizational Research*, 2, 37-71.
- Bayenet, B., Feola, C. and Tavernier, M. (2000). Strategic Management of Universities: Evaluation Policy and Policy Evaluation. *Higher Education Management*, 12(2), 65-80.
- Becher, T. and Trowler, P.R. (2001). *Academic Tribes and Territories: Intellectual Enquiry and the Culture of Disciplines*. Buckingham: SRHE/Open University Press.
- Béland, D. (2009). Gender, ideational analysis, and social policy. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 16(4), 558-581.
- Béland, D., and Cox, R.H. (2011). *Ideas and Politics in Social Science Research Ideas and Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Berger, P. L., and Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality*. Garden City, New York: Anchor.
- Berman, S. (1998). *The social democratic moment: Ideas and politics in the making of interwar Europe*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Berman, S. (2010). Ideology, History, and Politics. In D. Béland, and R. H. Cox (eds.), *Ideas and Politics in Social Science Research* (pp. 105-126). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bernstein, B. (1996). *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity: Theory, Research, Critique*. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Birnbaum, R. (1992). *How academic leadership works: Understanding success and failure in the college presidency*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bleiklie, I. (1998). Justifying the evaluative state: New Public Management ideals in higher education. *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, 4(2), 87-100.
- Bleiklie, I. and Kogan, M. (2006). Comparison and Theories. In M. Kogan, M. Bauer, I. Bleiklie and M. Henkel (eds.), *Transforming Higher Education: A Comparative Study (Second Edition)* (pp. 3-22). The Netherlands: Springer.
- Bleiklie, I. and Kogan, M. (2007). Organization and governance of universities. *Higher Education Policy*, 20(4), 477-493.
- Bloch, C., Pedersen, H.S. and Aagaard, K. (2012). *Arbejdsvilkår ved de tidligere og nuværende sektorforsknings-institutioner* [Working conditions at previous and present governmental research institutions]. Aarhus: Danish Centre for Studies in Research and Research Policy, Aarhus University.
- Blyth, M. (1997). "Any more bright ideas?" The ideational turn of comparative political economy. *Comparative Politics*, 29(2), 229-250.
- Blyth, M. (2002). *Great Transformation: Economic Ideas and Political Change in the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Columbia University.

- Blyth, M. (2003). Structures Do Not Come with an Instruction Sheet: Interests, Ideas, and Progress in Political Science. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 1(4), 695-706.
- Boyatzis, R.E. (1998). Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development. Sage.
- Braun, D. (2006). The mix of policy rationales in science and technology policy. *Melbourne Journal of Politics*, 31(7), 8-35.
- Brown, A.D., Stacey, P. and Nandhakumar, J. (2008). Making Sense of Sensemaking Narratives. *Human Relations*, 61(8), 1035-62.
- Brunsson, N. (1986). Organizing for inconsistencies: on organizational conflict, depression and hypocrisy as substitutes for action. *Scandinavian Journal of Management Studies*, 2(3), 165-185.
- Brunsson, N. and Olsen, J. (1993). *The Reforming Organization*. London: Routledge.
- Bryman, A. (2004). Qualitative research on leadership: A critical but appreciative review. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 15(6), 729-769.
- Callon, M. and Latour, B. (1981). Unscrewing the Big Leviathan: How Actors Macro-Structure Reality and How Sociologists Help Them to Do So. In K. Knorr-Cetina and A. V. Cicourel (eds.), *Advances in Social Theory and Methodology* (pp. 277-303). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Campbell, J.L. (2002). Ideas, politics, and public policy, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 28, 21-38.
- Campbell, J.L. (2004). *Institutional Change and Globalization*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Campbell, J.L. (2010). Institutional Reproduction and Change. In G. Morgan, J. L. Campbell, C. Crouch, O. K. Pedersen, and R. Whitley (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Comparative Institutional Analysis* (pp. 87-115). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Carstensen, M. B. (2010). The Nature of Ideas, and Why Political Scientists Should Care: Analysing the Danish Jobcentre Reform from an Ideational Perspective, *Political Studies*, 58, 847-865.
- Christensen, T. (2011). University governance reforms: potential problems of more autonomy?, *Higher Education*, 62(4), 503-517.
- Christensen, T. and Lægreid, P. (2001). *New Public Management: The Transformation of Ideas and Practice*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Clark, B. (1998). *Creating Entrepreneurial Universities, Organisational Pathways of Transformation*. Oxford/New York: Pergamon Elsevier.
- Coopey, J., Keegan, O., and Emler, N. (1997). Managers' Innovations as 'Sense-making'. *British Journal of Management*, 8, 301-315.
- Corbett, A. (2003). Ideas, institutions and policy entrepreneurs: towards a new history of higher education in the European Community. *European Journal of Education*, 38(3), 315-330.
- Czarniawska, B. (2004). *Narratives in social science research*. Sage.

- Czarniawska, B. (2008). How to misuse institutions and get away with it: Some reflections on institutional theory(ies). In R. Greenwood, C. Oliver, R. Suddaby, and K. Sahlin-Andersson (eds.), *The Sage handbook of organizational institutionalism* (p. 769-782). Sage.
- Czarniawska, B. (2009). Emerging institutions: pyramids or anthills?. *Organization Studies*, 30, 423-441.
- Czarniawska, B. and Joerges, B. (1996). Travels of ideas. In B. Czarniawska and G. Sevón (eds.) (1996), *Translating organizational change*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Czarniawska, B. and Sevón, G. (eds.) (1996). *Translating organizational change*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Czarniawska, B. and Sevón, G. (eds.) (2005). *Global ideas: How Ideas, Objects and Practices Travel in the Global Economy*. Malmö: Liber and Copenhagen Business School Press.
- Czarniawska-Joerges, B. (1992). Exploring complex organizations: A cultural perspective. Newbury Park: Sage.
- D'Amour, L. M. (2008). *An illustrative phenomenographic case study: charting the landscape of "public understanding of science"*. PhD dissertation. Lethbridge, Alta: University of Lethbridge, Faculty of Education
- De Boer, H. and File, J. (2009). Higher education governance reforms across Europe (MODERN project). Brussels, ESMU.
- De Boer, H., Enders, J., and Leisyte, L. (2007). Public sector reform in Dutch higher education: The organizational transformation of the university. *Public Administration*, 85(1), 27-46.
- De Boer, H., Goedegebuure, L., and Meek, V.L. (2010). The Changing Nature of Academic Middle Management: A Framework for Analysis. In L. V. Meek, L. Goedegebuure, R. Santiago and T. Carvalho (eds.), *The Changing Dynamics of Higher Education Middle Management* (pp. 229-241). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Deem, R. (2004). The Knowledge Worker, the Manager-Academic and the Contemporary UK University: New and Old Forms of Public Management?. *Financial Accountability & Management*, 20(2), 107-128.
- Deem, R. (2006). Changing Research Perspectives on the Management of Higher Education: Can Research Permeate the Activities of Manager-Academics?. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 60(3), 203-228.
- Deem, R., Reed, M., and Hillyard, S. (2007). Knowledge, Higher Education, and the New Managerialism: The Changing Management of UK Universities. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Degn, L. (2013). Making sense of management: a study of department heads' sensemaking processes in a changing environment. In J.E. Karlsen and R.M.O. Pritchard (eds.), *Resilient universities - confronting changes in a challenging world* (pp. 191-211). Bern: Peter Lang.
- Degn, L. and M.P. Sørensen. 2012. Universitetsloven fra 2003. På vej mod konkurrenceuniversitetet [The University Act of 2003. Heading toward the Competi-

- tion University]. In K. Aagaard, and N. Mejlgaard (eds.), Dansk forskningspolitik efter årtusindskiftet [Danish research policy in the new millennium] (pp. 59-93). Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag.
- DiMaggio, P. J. and Powell, W. W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American sociological review*, 48, 147-160.
- Dutton, J.E. and Dukerich, J.M. (1991). Keeping an Eye on the Mirror: Image and Identity in Organizational Adaptation. *The Academy of Management Journal*, 34(3), 517-554.
- Dutton, J. E., Dukerich, J., and Harquail, C.V. (1994). Organizational Images and Member Identification. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 39, 239-262.
- Eckel, P. D. and Kezar, A. J. (2003). *Taking the reins: Institutional transformation in higher education*. Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Ejersbo, N. and Greve, C. (2005). *Moderniseringen af den offentlige sektor* [The modernization of the public sector]. Copenhagen: Børsen.
- Elsbach, K.D. and Kramer, R.M. (1996). Members' responses to organizational identity threats: Encountering and countering the Business Week rankings. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 41, 442-76.
- Emmerij, L., Jolly, R., and Weiss, T. G. (2005). Economic and social thinking at the UN in historical perspective. *Development and Change*, 36(2), 211-235.
- Engwall, L., and Lindvall, C. E. (2012). Leaders of modern universities: Primi inter pares or chief executive officers?. In S. Tengblad (ed.), *The work of managers: Towards a practice theory of management* (pp. 206-225). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Erez, M. and Earley, P.C. (1993). *Culture, self-identity and work*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Esmark, A., Laustsen, C.B., and Andersen, N.Å. (2005). *Socialkonstruktivistiske analysestrategier* [Social constructivist analytical strategies]. Frederiksberg: Roskilde Universitetsforlag.
- Etzkowitz, H. and Leydesdorff, L. (1997). Universities and the Global Knowledge Economy: a Triple Helix of Academy-Industry-Government Relations. London: Pinter.
- Etzkowitz, H. and Leydesdorff, L. (2000). The dynamics of innovation: from National Systems and "Mode 2" to a triple helix of university-industry-government relations. *Research Policy*, 29(2), 109-123.
- European Commission (2005). Mobilising the brainpower of Europe: enabling universities to make their full contribution to the Lisbon Strategy. COM 152, Brussels.
- Eurydice (2000). *Two Decades of Reform in Higher Education in Europe: 1980 onwards*. European Commission (DG Education and Culture) < <http://www.ihep.org/assets/files/gcfp-files/TWODECADESREFORM.pdf>

- Fägerlind, I. and Strömqvist, G. (eds.) (2004). *Reforming Higher Education in the Nordic Countries: Studies of Change in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden*. Paris: International Institute for Educational Planning.
- Ferlie, E., Musselin, C., and Andresani, G. (2008). The Steering of Higher Education Systems: a Public Management Perspective. *Higher Education*, 56(3), 325-348.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (1991). *Magt og rationalitet. Bind I & II*. [Power and rationality, Vol. 1 and 2]. Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag.
- Flyvbjerg, B. 2006. Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative inquiry*, 12(2), 219-245.
- Folketinget (1970). *Forslag til Lov om universiteternes styrelse* [Law on the steering of the universities]. Copenhagen: The Danish Parliament.
- Folketinget (1973). *Forslag til Lov om styrelse af højere uddannelsesinstitutioner* [Law on the steering of higher education institutions]. Copenhagen: The Danish Parliament.
- Folketinget (1988). *Forslag til Lov om ændring af lov om styrelse af højere uddannelsesinstitutioner* [Proposal for amendment to the Law on the steering of higher education institutions]. The Copenhagen: The Danish Parliament.
- Folketinget (1993) *Forslag til Lov om universiteter* [Proposal for Law on universities]. Copenhagen: The Danish Parliament.  
<<https://www.retsinformation.dk/Forms/R0710.aspx?id=111293&exp=1>>
- Folketinget (1999) *Forslag til Lov om ændring af lov om universiteter m.fl.* [Proposal for amendment to the Law on universities and others]. Copenhagen: The Danish Parliament. <[www.retsinformation.dk/Forms/R0710.aspx?id=88632](http://www.retsinformation.dk/Forms/R0710.aspx?id=88632)>
- Folketinget (2003). *Forslag til Lov om universiteter* [Proposal for Law on Universities]. Copenhagen: The Danish Parliament.  
<[www.retsinformation.dk/Forms/R0710.aspx?id=100418](http://www.retsinformation.dk/Forms/R0710.aspx?id=100418)>.
- Gecas, V. (1982). The Self-Concept. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 8, 1-33.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays by Clifford Geertz*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gerring, J. (2007). *Case study research: principles and practices*. Cambridge University Press.
- Gibbons, M., Limoges, C., Nowotny, H., Schwartzman, S., Scott, P., and Trow, M. (1994). *The New Production of Knowledge: The Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies*. London: Sage.
- Gioia, D.A. and Chittipeddi, K. (1991). Sensemaking and sensegiving in strategic change initiation. *Strategic Management Journal*, 12, 433-448.
- Gioia, D.A. and Thomas, J.B. (1996). Identity, Image, and Issue Interpretation: Sensemaking During Strategic Change in Academia. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 41(3), 370-403.
- Gioia, D. A., Schultz, M., and Corley, K.G. (2000). Organizational identity, image, and adaptive instability. *Academy of management Review*, 25(1), 63-81.
- Glaser, B., and Strauss, A. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Chicago: Aldine.

- Gondo, M., Amis, J., and Vardaman, J. (2010). Case within a Case. In A.J. Mills, G. Durepos, and E. Wiebe (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research, vol. 1* (pp. 134-136). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Goodall, A. H. (2009). Highly cited leaders and the performance of research universities. *Research Policy*, 38(7), 1079-1092.
- Gornitzka, Å. and Maassen, P. (2000). National policies concerning the economic role of higher education, *Higher Education Policy*, 13(3), 225-230.
- Gornitzka, Å., Maassen, P., Olsen, J. P., and Stensaker, B. (2007). Europe of knowledge: Search for a new pact. In P. Maassen and J. P. Olsen (eds.), *University dynamics and European integration* (pp. 181-214). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Gornitzka, Å., Stensaker, B., Smeby, J.-C., and de Boer, H. (2004). Contract arrangements in the Nordic countries: solving the efficiency-effectiveness dilemma?, *Higher Education in Europe*, 29, 87-101.
- Habermas, J. (1987). The Idea of the University: Learning Processes. *New German Critique*, 41, 3-22.
- Hall, P. (1993). Policy paradigms, social learning, and the state: the case of economic policymaking in Britain. *Comparative Politics*, 25(3), 275-296.
- Hansen, A.D., and Sehested, K. (2003). *Konstruktive bidrag. Om teori og metode i konstruktivistisk videnskab* [Constructive contributions. On theory and methods in constructivist science]. Frederiksberg: Roskilde Universitetsforlag.
- Hansen, H.F. (2012). Fusionsprocesserne: Frivillighed under tvang [The merger processes: Forced voluntariness]. In K. Aagaard, and N. Mejlgaard (eds.), *Dansk forskningspolitik efter årtusindskiftet* [Danish research policy in the new millennium] (pp. 195-228). Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag.
- Hansen, K.E. (1971). *Universiteternes styrelseslov - kommenteret udgave* [The University steering act - commented edition]. Copenhagen: Gads Forlag.
- Hatch, M. J., and Schultz, M. (2000). Scaling the Tower of Babel: Relational Differences between Identity, Image, and Culture in Organizations. In M. Schultz, M.J. Hatch, and M. H. Larsen (eds.), *The Expressive Organization: Linking Identity, Reputation, and Corporate Brand* (pp. 13-35). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hay, C. (2001). The "Crisis" of Keynesianism and the Rise of Neoliberalism in Britain: an Ideational Institutional Approach. In J.L. Campbell and O.K. Pedersen (eds.), *The Rise of Neoliberalism and Institutional Analysis* (pp. 193-218). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Hay, C. (2006). Constructivist Institutionalism. In R. A. W. Rhodes and S.A. Binder (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of political institutions* (pp. 56-74). Oxford Handbooks Online.
- Henkel, M. (1997). Academic Values and the University as Corporate Enterprise. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 51(2), 134-143
- Henkel, M. (2000). *Academic Identities and Policy Change in Higher Education*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

- Henkel, M. (2004). Current science policies and their implications for the formation and maintenance of academic identity. *Higher Education Policy*, 17(2), 167-182.
- Henkel, M. (2005). Academic identity and autonomy in a changing policy environment. *Higher Education*, 49(1-2), 155-176.
- Hogg, M. A., and Abrams. D. (1990). Social motivation, self-esteem and social identity. In M.A. Hogg and D. Abrams (eds.), *Social identity theory: Constructive and critical advances* (pp. 28-47). New York: Springer-Verlag Publishing.
- Hood, C. (1995). The "New Public Management" in the 1980s: variations on a theme. *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, 20(2), 93-109.
- Hope, O. (2010). The Politics of Middle Management Sensemaking and Sensegiving. *Journal of Change Management*, 10(2), 195-215.
- Howe, K. R. (1998). The interpretive turn and the new debate in education. *Educational Researcher*, 27(8), 13-20.
- Huisman, J. and Currie, J. (2004). Accountability in higher education: Bridge over troubled water?. *Higher Education*, 48(4), 529-551.
- Huisman, J., Norgaard, J.D., Rasmussen, J.G. and Stensaker, B. (2002). 'Alternative' universities revisited: a study of the distinctiveness of universities established in the spirit of 1968. *Tertiary Education and Management*, 8, 315-332
- Humphreys, M. and Brown, A.D. (2002). Narratives of organizational identity and identification: A case study of hegemony and resistance. *Organization Studies*, 23, 421-447.
- Husserl E. (1913). Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Erstes Buch: Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phänomenologie. *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologie Forschung*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Jennings, P. D., and Greenwood, R. (2003). Constructing the Iron Cage: Institutional Theory and Enactment. In R. Westwood and S. Clegg (eds.), *Debating organization: point-counterpoint in organization studies* (pp. 195-207). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Johnston, D. D. (1994). *The art and science of persuasion*. Brown & Benchmark Publishers.
- Kezar, A. (2013). Understanding sensemaking/sensegiving in transformational change processes from the bottom up. *Higher Education*, 65(6), 761-780.
- Knight, K. (2006). Transformations of the Concept of Ideology in the Twentieth Century. *American Political Science Review*, 100(4), 619-626.
- Kogan, M., Bauer, M., Bleiklie, I., and Henkel, M. (2000). *Transforming Higher Education. A Comparative Study*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Kooiman, J. (2008). Exploring the concept of governability. *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice*, 10(2), 171-190.
- Kvale, S. (1995). The social construction of validity. *Qualitative inquiry*, 1(1), 19-40.



- Kwiek, M. (2005). The university and the state in a global age: Renegotiating the traditional social contract. *European Educational Research Journal*, 4(4), 324-342.
- Latour, B. (1986). The Powers of Association. In J. Law (ed.), *Power, Action and Belief* (pp. 261-277). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Lewis, L. K. (2011). Organizational change: Creating change through strategic communication (Vol. 4). John Wiley & Sons.
- Lieberman, R. C. (2002). Ideas, institutions, and political order: Explaining political change. *American political science review*, 96(4), 697-712.
- Luhmann, N. (1984). *Soziale systeme: grundriss einer allgemeinen theorie*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Luhmann, N. (2000). *Organisation und Entscheidung*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- Maassen, P. (2006). *The Modernisation of European Higher Education. A Multi Level Analysis*. Paper presented at the Directors General for Higher Education Meeting. Helsinki, 19-20 October 2006.
- Maassen, P. (2008). The modernisation of European higher education. National policy dynamics. In A. Amaral and I. Bleiklie (eds.), *From governance to identity. Festschrift for Mary Henkel* (pp. 95-112). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Macfarlane, B. (2011). The Morphing of Academic Practice: Unbundling and the Rise of the Para-Academic, *Higher Education Quarterly*, 65(1), 59-73.
- Maitlis, S. (2005). The Social Processes of Organizational Sensemaking. *Academy of Management Journal*, 48(1), 21-49.
- Marton, F., and Booth, S. A. (1997). *Learning and awareness*. Psychology Press.
- Meek, V. L., Goedegebuure, L., Santiago, R., and Carvalho, T. (eds.) (2010). *The Changing Dynamics of Higher Education Middle Management*. Dordrecht: Springer Science+Business Media B.V.
- Mehta, J. (2011). The Varied Roles of Ideas in Politics: From "Whether" to "How". In D. Béland and R.H. Cox (eds.), *Ideas and Politics in Social Science Research Ideas and Politics* (pp. 23-46). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Menahem, G. (2008). The transformation of higher education in Israel since the 1990s: the role of ideas and policy paradigms. *Governance: An International Journal of Policy, Administration, and Institutions*, 21(4), 499-526.
- Meyer, J. W., and Rowan, B. (1977). Institutionalized organizations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony. *American journal of sociology*, 83(2), 340-363.
- Meyer, J. W., and Scott, W. R. (1983). *Organizational environments: Ritual and rationality*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Mills, J.H. (2003). *Making sense of Organizational Change*. New York: Routledge.
- Mills, J.H., Thurlow, A., and Mills, A.J. (2010). Making sense of sensemaking: the critical sensemaking approach. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, 5(2), 182-195.
- Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation (2009). *Danish University Evaluation 2009*. Copenhagen: The Danish University and Property Agency.

- Morphew, C. C. (2009). Conceptualizing change in the institutional diversity of US colleges and universities. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 80(3), 243-269.
- Moscatti, R. (2008). Transforming a Centralised System of Higher Education: Reform and Academic Resistance in Italy. In A. Amaral and I. Bleiklie (eds.), *From governance to identity. Festschrift for Mary Henkel* (pp. 131-137). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Mukhtarov, F. (2012). Rethinking the travel of ideas: policy translation in the water sector. *Policy & Politics* (in press). DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1332/030557312X655459>.
- Neave, G. (1988). On the cultivation of quality, efficiency and enterprise: An overview of recent trends in higher education in Western Europe, 1986–1988. *European Journal of Education*, 23(1–2), 7–23.
- Neave, G. (1998). The evaluative state reconsidered. *European Journal of education*, 33(3), 265-284.
- Neave, G. and van Vught, F. (eds.) (1991). *Prometheus Bound, the Changing Relationship Between Government and Higher Education in Western Europe*. London: Pergamon.
- Neave, G. and van Vught, F. (eds.) (1994). *Government and Higher Education Relationships across Three Continents: The Winds of Change*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Nokkala, T. and Bladh, A. (2014). Institutional Autonomy and Academic Freedom in the Nordic Context—Similarities and Differences. *Higher Education Policy*, 27, 1-21.
- Nowotny, H., Scott, P., and Gibbons, M. (2001). *Re-Thinking Science: Knowledge and the Public in an Age of Uncertainty*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- O'Reilly, M., Ronzoni, P., and Dogra, N. (2013). *Research with Children: Theory and Practice*. London: Sage.
- OECD (2009). *Higher Education to 2030, Volume 2. Globalisation*, Paris: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.
- Oliver, C. (1991). Strategic Responses to Institutional Processes. *Academy of Management Review*, 16(1), 145-179.
- Olsen, J.P. (2005). *The Institutional Dynamics of the (European) University*. Oslo: ARENA – Centre for European Studies, University of Oslo.
- Öquist, G. and Benner, M. (2012). *Fostering breakthrough research: A comparative study*. The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences.
- Paradeise, C., Ferlie, E., Bleiklie, I. and Reale, E. (eds.) (2009). *University Governance: Western European Comparative Perspectives*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Pavlich, G. (2010). Paradigmatic Cases. In A.J. Mills, G. Durepos, and E. Wiebe (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research, vol. 2* (pp. 645-647). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Petersen, N. (1997). Autonomy and Professionalism – Danish Higher Education and the Problems of State Interference. In K.D. Wolff (ed.), *Autonomy and External Control: The University in Search of the Golden Mean* (pp. 155-168). Munich: Ludicium verlag GmbH.

- Pfeffer, J. and Salancik, G.R. (1978). The external control of organizations: A resource dependence perspective. New York: Harper and Row.
- Pietilä, M. (2013). The many faces of research profiling: academic leaders' conceptions of research steering. *Higher Education*, doi:10.1007/s10734-013-9653-5
- Piironen, O. (2013). The transnational idea of university autonomy and the reform of the Finnish universities act. *Higher Education Policy*, 26(1), 127-146.
- Pinheiro, R. and Stensaker, B. (2013). Designing the Entrepreneurial University: The Interpretation of a Global Idea. *Public Organization Review*, DOI 10.1007/s11115-013-0241-z.
- Polanyi, M. (1962). The Republic of Science: its Political and Economic Theory, *Minnerva*, 1(1), 54-73.
- Pollitt, C. (1990). Managerialism and the public services: The Anglo-American experience. Oxford: Basil Blackwell
- Pollitt, C. (1995). Justification by works or by faith? Evaluating the New Public Management, *Evaluation*, 1(2), 133-154.
- Porac, J., Thomas, H., and Baden-Fuller, C. (1989). Competitive Groups as Cognitive Communities: the Case of Scottish Knitwear Manufacturers. *Journal of Management Studies*, 26, 397-414.
- Price, J.M.C. (2010). Open Coding. In A.J. Mills, G. Durepos, and E. Wiebe (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*, vol. 1 (pp. 155-157). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Rabinow, P. and Sullivan, W.M. (1979). *Interpretive social science: A reader*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Ragin, C. (2000). The Places of Case-Study Research. Comparative and Historical Sociology (Newsletter of the Comparative and Historical Sociology section of the American Sociological Association), 13(1), 1-2.
- Ravasi, D., and Schultz, M. (2006). Responding to organizational identity threats: Exploring the role of organizational culture. *Academy of Management Journal*, 49(3), 433-458.
- Reger, R. K., Gustafson, L. T., Demarie, S. M., and Mullane, J. V. (1994). Reframing the organization: Why implementing total quality is easier said than done. *Academy of Management Review*, 19(3), 565-584.
- Rhodes, R.A.W., Binder, S.A. and Rockman, B.A. (2008). *The Oxford Handbook of Political Institutions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rich, G. A. (1997). The sales manager as a role model: Effects on trust, job satisfaction, and performance of salespeople. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 25(4), 319-328.
- Ring, P. S., and Van de Ven, A.H. (1989). Legal and managerial dimensions of transactions. In A. H. Van de Ven, H. Angle and M. S. Poole (eds.), *Research on the Management of Innovation: The Minnesota Studies* (pp. 171-192). New York: Ballinger/Harper Row.
- Romzek, B.S. (2000). Dynamics of public accountability in an era of reform. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 66(1), 21-44.
- Rorty, R. (1989). *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*. Cambridge University Press.

- Rorty, R. (Ed.) (1992). *The linguistic turn: Essays in philosophical method*. University of Chicago Press.
- Rouleau, L. (2005). Micro-Practices of Strategic Sensemaking and Sensegiving: How Middle Managers Interpret and Sell Change Every Day. *Journal of Management Studies*, 42(7), 1413-1441.
- Rueschemeyer, D. (2006). Why and How Ideas Matter. In R.E. Goodin and C. Tilly (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis* (pp. 227-51). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sahlin, K. and Wedlin, L. (2008). Circulating Ideas: Imitation, Translation and Editing. In R. Greenwood, C. Oliver, R. Suddaby, and K. Sahlin-Andersson (eds.), *Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism* (pp. 218-242). Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Schmidt, V.A. (2002). *The Futures of European Capitalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schmidt, V.A. (2006). *Democracy in Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schmidt, V.A. (2008). Discursive institutionalism: the explanatory power of ideas and discourse. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 11, 303-326.
- Schmidt, V.A. (2011). Reconciling Ideas and Institutions through Discursive Institutionalism. In D. Béland, and R. H. Cox (eds.), *Ideas and Politics in Social Science Research* (pp. 64-89). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Schmidt, V.A., and Radaelli, C. M. (2004). Policy change and discourse in Europe: Conceptual and methodological issues. *West European Politics*, 27(2), 183-210.
- Schrøder, K. C. (1999). The best of both worlds? Media audience research between rival paradigms. In P. Alasuutari (ed), *Rethinking the Media Audience* (pp. 38-68). London: Sage.
- Schultz, F., and Wehmeier, S. (2010). Institutionalization of corporate social responsibility within corporate communications: Combining institutional, sensemaking and communication perspectives. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 15(1), 9-29.
- Scott, W.R. (1995). *Institutions and Organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Selznik, P. (1957). *Leadership in Administration*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Simon, H.A. (1957). Models of man – Social and rational: Mathematical essays on rational human behavior in a social setting. New York: Wiley.
- Slaughter, S. and Leslie, L.L. (1997). *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies, and the Entrepreneurial University*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Smerek, R.E. (2011). Sensemaking and Sensegiving: An Exploratory Study of the Simultaneous “Being and Learning” of New College and University Presidents. *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies*, 18(1), 80-94.
- Smircich, L. and Stubbart, C. (1985). Strategic management in an enacted world. *Academy of Management Review*, 10(4), 724-736.
- Sørensen, E. and Torfing, J. (2008). Scandinavian studies of power and democracy. A review article. *Public Administration*, 79(1), 223-248.
- Stake, R.E. (1978). The case study method in social inquiry. *Educational researcher*, 7(2), 5-8.

- Starbuck, W. H. and Milliken, F.J. (1988). Executives' perceptual filters: What they notice and how they make sense. In D. C. Hambrick (ed), *The Executive Effect: Concepts and Methods for Studying Top Managers* (pp. 35-65). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Stensaker, B. (2004). The transformation of organisational identities: interpretations of policies concerning the quality of teaching and learning in Norwegian higher education. PhD dissertation. University of Twente.
- Stensaker, B., Enders, J. and de Boer, H. (2007). Comparative analysis. The extent and impact of higher education governance reform across Europe. Enschede: CHEPS, NIFU STEP, CHE, ESMU
- Tajfel, H. and Turner, J. C. (1985). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. In S. Worchel and W. G. Austin (eds.), *Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (pp. 7-24). Chicago: Nelson-Hall.
- Tannenwald, N., and Wohlforth, W. C. (2005). Introduction: the role of ideas and the end of the Cold War. *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 7(2), 3-12.
- Taylor, C. (1989). *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thompson, M. and Heron, P. (2005). The difference a manager can make: organizational justice and knowledge worker commitment. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 16(3), 383-404
- Torring, J. (2005). Institutioner og magt [Institutions and power]. In K. Nielsen (Ed.), *Institutionel teori: en tværfaglig introduktion* [Institutional theory: a cross-disciplinary introduction] (pp. 215-231). Roskilde: Samfundslitteratur.
- Trow, M. (1996). Trust, markets and accountability in higher education: a comparative perspective. *Higher Education Policy*, 9(4), 309-324.
- Tsoukas, H., and Chia, R. (2002). Organizational Becoming: Rethinking Organizational Change. *Organization Science*, 13(5), 567-582.
- Välilmaa, J. (1998). Culture and identity in higher education research. *Higher Education*, 36(2), 119-138.
- Välilmaa, J., and Hoffman, D. (2008). Knowledge society discourse and higher education. *Higher Education*, 56(3), 265-285.
- Van Maanen, J., and Barley, S.R. (1984). Occupational communities: Culture and control in organizations. In B.M. Staw and L.L. Cummings (eds.), *Research in organizational behaviour*, Vol. 6 (pp. 287-365). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Walsh, J. I. (2000). When do ideas matter? Explaining the successes and failures of Thatcherite ideas. *Comparative Political Studies*, 33(4), 483-516.
- Wandel, C.F. (1985). *Betænkning nr. 1055 fra Udvalget til forberedelse af en revision af lov om styrelse af højere uddannelsesinstitutioner* [White paper no. 1055 from the Committee for the preparation of a revision of the Law on the steering of higher education institutions].  
<[http://www.statensnet.dk/betaenkninger/1001-1200/1055-1985/1055-1985\\_pdf/searchable\\_1055-1985.pdf](http://www.statensnet.dk/betaenkninger/1001-1200/1055-1985/1055-1985_pdf/searchable_1055-1985.pdf)>

- Weick, K.E. (1976). Educational organizations as loosely coupled systems. *Administrative science quarterly*, 21(1), 1-19.
- Weick, K.E. (1988). Enacted Sensemaking in Crisis Situations. *Journal of Management Studies*, 25(4), 305-317.
- Weick, K.E. (1990). The vulnerable system: An analysis of the Tenerife air disaster. *Journal of management*, 16(3), 571-593.
- Weick, K.E. (1993). Collapse of sensemaking in organizations: The Mann Gulch Disaster. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 38, 628-652.
- Weick, K.E. (1995). *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Weick, K.E., Sutcliffe, K., and Obstfeld, D. (2005). Organizing and the Process of Sensemaking. *Organization Science*, 16(4), 409-421.
- Whetten, D. A. (2006). Albert and Whetten revisited: Strengthening the concept of organizational identity. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 15(3), 219-234.
- Whitchurch, C. (2008). Shifting Identities and Blurring Boundaries: the Emergence of 'Third Space Professionals' in UK Higher Education, *Higher Education Quarterly*, 62(4), 376-395.
- Yin, R. (1984). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publishing
- Ylijoki, O. and Ursin, J. (2013). The construction of academic identity in the changes of Finnish higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38(8), 1135-1149.
- Yukl, G. (1989). Managerial leadership: A review of theory and research. *Journal of management*, 15(2), 251-289.

# Appendix 1: Interview guides

## 1a) Interview guide used in interviews with department heads (translated)

### Briefing the informant:

- Introduction of the interviewer
- The aim of my study is to examine how different change impulses affect the space for action of managers at different levels in Danish universities. Change impulses could e.g. be specific policy measures, university reforms and the like, but also more informal and diffuse impulses, such as international tendencies or cultural pressure.

Theme	Theoretical question	Practical question
Background	How are issues of self-consistency constructed in the sensemaking process?	Could you briefly describe your background (educational, research- and management-wise)?
	How is a relevant 'story-progression' constructed?	Could you tell me about how you got the job as university manager? (Why did you run/apply? Why do you think you got the job?)
University management – being a university manager?	Which categories emerge and are made salient in the sensemaking process?	What do you think is the main aspect which differentiates being a manager in a university, from being a manager in other areas/organizations?
	How are these categories related and used as points of identification?	What characterizes a good university manager? What are the characteristics?
	How is identity constructed, in terms of self-efficacy and self-enhancement?	What do you perceive to be your main task as a manager in a university of today? (How do you seek to carry out this task?)
		What do you believe to be the most important factors that define your space for action as a manager? (Rules, procedures, culture, yourself etc.?)

		<p>What expectations, besides the formal tasks and demands, are you met with in the role of manager? How are these expectations expressed?</p>
		<p>How do you experience that the university (organization) and society or the political system respectively define "the good manager"? Is there a conflict?</p>
		<p>How do you see yourself – mostly as an academic or mostly as a manager – and why? How do you balance the roles?</p>
		<p>How do you perceive the possibility for continuing on in a career as a manager, or returning to academia as a researcher/teacher?</p>
<p>Change impulses</p>	<p>How is the environment enacted?</p>	<p>Looking back at the time in which you have been a university manager, what have in your opinion been the greatest changes in the universities? Why?</p>
		<p>How have you experienced the pressure for change – both from without and within? Is the primary pressure to change coming from outside or is it a continual process?</p>
		<p>How have you experienced the reform time in terms of tasks? Have you been given new tasks or do you experience different expectations to you as a manager?</p>
		<p>How did your university handle the reforms (proactively, reactively or?) Which initiatives have been launched and which of those are most important?</p>
		<p>How have specific initiatives, e.g. the demand for strategy development at all levels influenced your management practice?  How are these specific changes handled in practice? How do you seek to balance new demands and existing culture?</p>



Experiences of the institutional/ideational circumstances in general	How is the environment enacted in terms of legitimate actors, institutional frames etc.?	<p>Is it your experience that the professional, academic and disciplinary frames have changed while you have been a manager, and if so, how has this impacted your role as an academic manager?</p> <p>E.g. in terms of new consortia, demands for interdisciplinarity, new sub-disciplines etc.</p> <p>Which actors do you perceive to have the greatest influence on how and how much the universities change?</p> <p>How do you think your university is perceived in society and by politicians? E.g. in comparison to other universities?</p>
	How is the audience described?	
	Perceptions of organizational image?	
		What do you see as the three biggest challenges that the universities face at present?
Conclusion		Is there something you feel we haven't covered?

## 1B) Interview guide used in interviews with top level managers (translated)

Theme	Theoretical question	Practical question
Background	How are issues of selfconsistency constructed in the sensemaking process?	Could you briefly describe your background (educational, research- and management-wise)?
	How is a relevant 'story- progression' constructed?	Could you tell me about how you got the job as university manager? (Why did you run/apply? Why do you think you got the job?)
University management – being a university manager?	Which categories emerge and are made salient in the sensemaking process?  How are these categories related and used as points of identification?  How is identity constructed, in terms of self-efficacy and self- enhancement?	What do you think is the main aspect which differentiates being a manager in a university, from being a manager in other areas/organizations?
		What characterizes a good university manager? What are the characteristics?
		What do you perceive to be your main task as a manager in a university of today?  (How do you seek to carry out this task?)
		What expectations, besides the formal tasks and demands, are you met with in the role of manager? How are these expectations expressed?
		How do you perceive the balance between being a researcher/academic and being a manager?
		What are you? And when did you make the choice?
Strategic management	How (if at all) are new ideas (specifically strategic management) made part of sensemaking, identity and practice?  How are practices of sensegiving perceived?	Over the past decades there has been an increased focus on strategic management – to what degree does "being a strategic manager" influence your management practice?
		Is it at the expense of something else?
		How do you approach a strategy development process, e.g. the current strategic plan – how much is your own vision, and how much comes from outside and inside?

		How do you see your own role in this process of balancing different interests and ideas? – exogenous demands, personal ideas and visions, culture?
Change impulses – general and specific	How is the environment enacted?	Looking back at the time you have been a university manager, what have been the most important impulses, that have changed the universities? (political/national, international/convergence, economic etc.?)
	How is audience perceived?	
	How is identity constructed, in terms of self-efficacy and self-enhancement?	
		How have you experienced the pressure for change – both from without and within? Is the primary pressure coming from outside or from inside? Or is it e.g something you bring with you?
		How do you see your own role in terms of these impulses and pressures – and in terms of the development of the university (cf. the typology)

1c) Interview guide used in focus group interviews with academic staff (translated)

**Briefing of informants**

- Thank you for being part of my study.
- Details about the interviewer.
- Details about the project: Concerns the changing conditions for management and roles in universities and how these changes influence practice. I have so far looked at how managers handle their changing environment, and the challenges they face.
- The purpose today is to learn more about how you perceive management and the various management roles and how management affects academic practice
- The focus group interview is somewhat different from an individual interview session. I am primarily interested in getting you to talk to each other and not simply "answer" questions. I am interested in your experiences and perceptions, so the purpose is not to get the right answer but your subjective experiences. This means that I will not ask a lot of questions, but merely a few, broad questions, that I would like you to discuss with each other.
- I also have a few exercises, but I will introduce them when we get to it.
- The session will last appr. 1½-2 hours and I would like to record it – the recording will be erased.
- The purpose of the recording is both to ensure that I can remember what you say, and that you can be certain that I do not quote you for something you did not say.
- You should not be afraid to speak freely, transcripts will only be seen by me and a student worker, and you will naturally be allowed to approve quotes if you should want to.

Theme	Theoretical question	Practical question
Academic practice	Which norms, values and criteria for legitimacy are activated in the sensemaking processes concerning academic practice?	What motivated you to go into academia initially?
		What motivates you to stay?
		Discuss which conditions are optimal for you in your academic practice? (What would you like to improve, what couldn't you do without?)
		What is the greatest difference in your conditions/circumstances surrounding academic practice, from when you entered academia till now?
Management (abstract)	Which norms, values and criteria for legitimacy are activated in the sensemaking processes concerning university management?	Exercise 1 (Joint) Exercise 2 (Individual) Discuss with each other, on the basis of these answers which role you think a Rector, a Dean and a Department Head should fill in a university as your own.
Management in relation to academic practice (concrete)	How is management perceived in relation to the academic practice?	How do you perceive management in your everyday life as researchers and teachers?
		Has this changed while you have been employed?
		How does the strategy of the university/department affect your work?

### Exercise 1:

As a group, write down 1-3 tasks, that you agree are the key tasks for Rector, Dean and Department Head respectively.

*Primary tasks of the Rector*

*Primary tasks of the Dean*

*Primary tasks of the Department Head*

### Exercise 2:

Fill out the table below by indicating how the tasks should ideally be distributed among the different actors (percent).

	Rector	Dean	Department Head	Other manager	Researcher/teacher	
Responsibility for the quality assurance of education						100 %
Responsibility for the quality assurance of research						100 %
Construction of strategic plans and responsibility for the strategic cooperation						100 %
Responsibility for the professional (academic) development of the staff (incl. Research and teaching profiles)						100 %
Responsibility for the external representation of the University						100 %
Responsibility for the construction and development of the profession (academic) profile of the institution						100 %

## Appendix 2: Example of coding process

On the following pages, I will illustrate how the coding of the interview data was carried out by way of an example from the department head study (chapter 6).

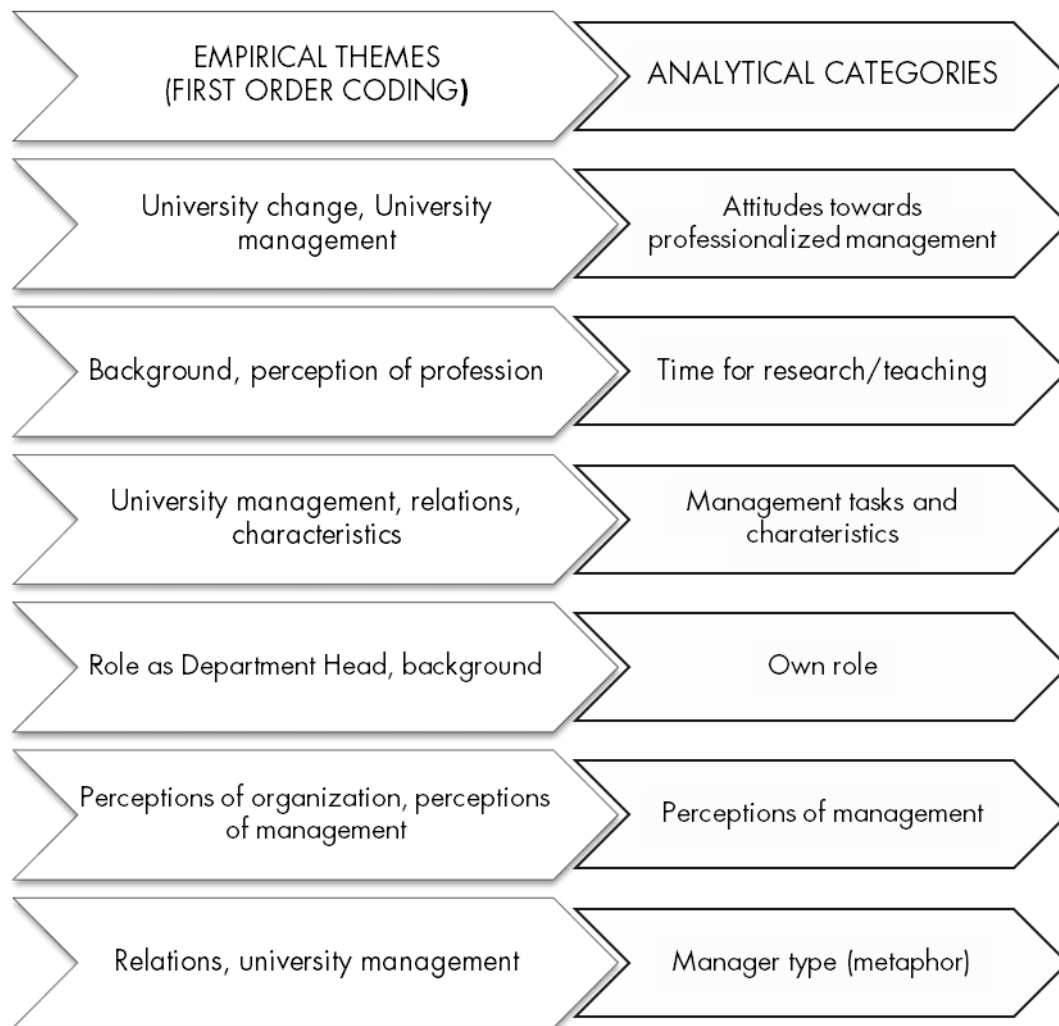
Coding was done in Nvivo – a qualitative data analysis software program, to which the transcripts were uploaded. The initial step was, as mentioned in Chapter 3, a first-order coding, which attempted to map the thematic content of the interviews. The codes were inductively derived and the list of codes thus expanded significantly during the initial steps in first order coding process. As the process continued however less and less new codes emerged. Sentences or paragraphs may have more than one code assigned to it, and the level of abstraction of the individual codes differ somewhat. The second step was to relate the themes to concepts from the theoretical framework, e.g. identity construction, enactment, salient cues and frames. This resulted in a number of analytical categories, which were substantiated by keywords or quotes from the transcripts. The third step was the construction of generalized themes from these categories, i.e. constructs that allowed for the investigation of patterns in the data. An example of the process is illustrated below.

Example of first order coding: organizing the data by inductive coding of the themes of the interview

Themes
University management
Tools
Characteristics
Difference from previous legal frameworks
University culture
University change
Strategic focus
Professional management
Against professional or external managers
For professional or external managers
Challenges
Relations
Relations to top level management
Relations to external stakeholders
Relations between administration and academics
Relations to academics
Primary actors
Translation
Perception of the organization
Perceptions of management
Conflict
The role as Department Head
Perception of the role
The role as middle manager
Management tasks
Management experience
Space for action
Expectations
The relation between the role as academic and as manager
Funding
Future
Perception of profession
Background



Example of second order coding: relating themes to theoretical concepts and constructing analytical categories



Analytical categories	Keywords and quotes
Attitudes towards and perceptions of professionalized management (translation of new ideas)	Pro: Managers are not sergeants and external may be just as good as internal  Con: Management is steering – university management is coordination and self-management
Time for research/teaching - balancing the roles (Identity constructions – self-image)	Making time research is impossible - teaching as a way of staying connected  Finds some time for research  No research
Management tasks and manager characteristics (Enactment)	Talk to employees/nursing – shielding researchers from unreasonable demands from the outside world  Create sensible frames for the core tasks – delegation – self-management  Create incentives for optimization
Manager type (metaphor) (identity construction)	“Labour coach”, shielder, umbrella  Mediator, facilitator  Developer, setter and bearer of culture
Perception of management as a concept and discipline  (salient frames, scales of measurement, identity construction)	Collegial management as the ideal – purpose is to act as a counterweight to professionalization  Management is direction – self-image: coordination.  Management as culture and coordination
Own role as manager  (identity construction – self-consistency, self-efficacy)	It has been necessary to be shielder, but did not really want that role. Will miss management – being in the loop.  The management role is an obligation in order to keep the department in one piece.  Wanted to influence the direction of the department. Interest in the political decision making processes.  Finds the strategic element interesting – has always had an interest in management – applied for the job by own accord.

Example of third order coding: developing themes from analytical categories to investigate patterns

