Scandinavian Higher Education Governance
By Ivar Bleiklie and Svein Michelsen, 2017

Paper to be presented at The XVIII Nordic Political Science Congress
The University of Southern Denmark, Odense, Denmark, August 8-11, 2017
Introduction

The three Scandinavian countries – Denmark, Norway and Sweden – have a lot in common when considered as political entities. As unitary, parliamentary (relatively decentralized) democracies with constitutional monarchs as heads of state, their overall political regimes have a number of basic characteristics in common. The fact that they also represent the archetypical examples of universal welfare states (a.k.a. “The Scandinavian Model”) that extend inclusive cradle to grave public services to the entire population, and are among the most prosperous and peaceful countries in the world, add to this impression of three almost identical polities and societies. Even the languages are so similar that Danes, Norwegians and Swedes understand one another when they speak their respective mother tongues.

Yet when one looks more closely at the three countries, important differences emerge (Kogan et al 2006; Hansen 2011). Thus in spite of the similarities, the idea that the Scandinavian politico-administrative systems represent one common model with characteristics that clearly distinguish them from those of other European countries is a contested one. In this paper we raise the issue of similarities and differences among the higher education governance systems of the three Scandinavian countries as three questions. 1) What are the differences and similarities among the three countries? 2) How can the similarities and differences be explained? 3) Are the similarities strong enough that they warrant the concept of a Scandinavian model of higher education governance?

These questions require first of all conceptual clarification of characteristics of the governance systems which we consider essential in distinguishing specific types or models of governance systems. We shall therefore look at two different aspects of the governance systems depending on whether we consider them as results of partisan politics or as products of politico-administrative regimes i.e. relatively stable, institutionalized arrangements that at critical junctures may open up for actors to shape or reshape them. Secondly we will briefly present the higher education sectors of the three countries in order to identify similarities and differences of their governance systems as they have evolved the last 10-20 years. Finally we will discuss how the two perspectives may help explaining
The differences and similarities of Scandinavian higher education governance systems and draw some conclusions regarding the differences and similarities among them.

Theoretical Perspectives

*Partisan politics and actor constellations*

The first perspective focuses on partisan politics, where policy outcomes are considered products of actor choice. The role of partisan politics in shaping public policy have attributed central importance to the ideological differences between groups within society and the parties that represent these groups. Critical here has been the left-right dimension according to which differing class interests are seen as pivotal and as bearers of clear ideological stances. Policy output, in this view, depends on the partisan composition of government. This view has been challenged by new strands of research, which have emphasized various extensions of the old partisan politics argument (Beramendi et al 2013). One strand is related to the effects of electoral changes on party policy positions. Electoral constituencies have changed and do not correspond to those of the industrial age anymore (Ibid). Second, there is the role of context, in the form of electoral institutions, party competition and the configuration of party systems. Various contributions have shown that the institutional context, party systems and party competition matter, and that differences in political systems and structures are likely to affect partisan political dynamics (Iversen and Soskice 2006).

The Scandinavian countries have given birth to a peculiar party configuration, the five-party format (Demker and Svåsand 2007). They are also characterized by various forms of proportional representation systems. They have developed sizeable and inclusive higher education systems. Comparing the effect of electoral systems Ansell (2013:150) found that while political parties in majoritarian electoral systems (Australia, Canada, France, UK, USA) are quite polarized in a pattern where leftist parties favor expansion and redistribution, whereas rightist parties oppose both. Proportional systems (Germany, Ireland, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland) on the other hand, seem to have a moderating effect in the sense
that the association between educational policy preferences and party ideology is gone. The difference between the policy preferences of major political parties is much smaller. In Germany and particularly Norway and Sweden there is no relationship between party preferences regarding education and redistribution. Ansell (2013) shows that actual party preferences depend heavily on the institutional context. Whether left parties favor or oppose the allocation of resources to higher education depends on the structure of the higher education system (mass v. elite system) in a country. In a mass university system, left parties favor increased spending on tertiary education, because it has a redistributive effect. This in turn form a set of conditions where the attitudes of actors involved in partisan politics are determined by how higher education as a forceful tool of socio-economic redistribution, affects major social interests.

The Scandinavian countries are typical representatives of the Mass Public Model, because the support for social democratic parties, combined with relatively small social differences and proportional electoral systems have provided favorable conditions for this model. In short, major interest groups and the political parties representing them add up to broad coalitions that favor expansion. The strength of the partisan politics approach to the study of political outcomes is its focus on political actors as agents of institutional change. One weakness or blind spot is that it does not recognize the significance of the administrative apparatus. Partisan politics is about winning elections and making political decisions. There has been little interest in and focus on how decisions are made in political institutions, how such decisions are prepared, interpreted and implemented, but perhaps this is about to change. “New” partisan politics is paying more attention to context (Beramendi et al 2013). In Scandinavian countries a large public sector produces institutional conditions for maintaining cross-class coalitions, and actor constellations also feature bureaucrats and civil servants of various sorts. There is much to suggest that cross-class solidarity and a large public higher education sector produce mutually reinforcing structures and relationships over time (Ibid.)

The assumptions that are made about actor behavior are based on statistical data on voter preferences and educational spending from large samples. Assumptions about political processes are in turn based on statistical patterns of outcomes. We know little about the actual processes themselves. It is for instance a presumption that policies are made by
political parties to conform to what they assume are the preferences of their constituencies. Below we will present perspective that does two things: It focuses on different aspects of the political system compared to the partisan politics perspective, and it focuses on relatively stable structural characteristics of these systems, what is known as politico-administrative regimes. We bring this literature together with historical institutionalism, a literature that focuses on the dynamics within politico-administrative and of regimes and the actual decision processes the actors who make them and the conditions under which they are made that bring change about at critical junctures. This perspective brings together the empirical study of policy choice and path dependencies. The impact of partisan politics varies over time. In times of path formation, existing regimes find themselves at critical junctures that opens up a wider space for partisan politics and political agency than in times of path stabilization (Pierson 2000).

*Politico-administrative regimes and regime dynamics*

The politico-administrative regime approach, with its focus on the impact on administrative reform trajectories, has won increasing prominence in the public administration field (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004). Basically it is argued that politico-administrative systems have the potential to shape administrative reform trajectories (Knill 1998, Christensen and Lægreid 2003, Verhoest et al 2010, Painter and Peters 2010). As such they constrain and enable political choice. The first generation of administrative reform studies made distinctions between trailblazers and policy laggards, closing in on significant differences between radical and early reformers of Anglo-Saxon countries and far more hesitant continental European countries (Kickert 2011, Hansen 2011). In the second generation studies variations in reform trajectories were related to two different administrative traditions/politico-administrative regimes; each with their own set of values and assumptions; that of the “Public interest” and of the “Rechtsstaat” (Pollit and Bouckaert 2004). The Anglo-Saxon Public interest model assigns a less prominent role to the state, emphasizes political rather than legal accountability mechanisms, market mechanisms, and favors a general reduction of public sector distinctiveness. The Rechtsstaat model considers the state as an integrating force, focused on the preparation and enforcement of law, with a bureaucracy that emphasizes rule-following and legal control. Still new elements have been imposed in the form of budget
controls in order to move the civil service in the direction of performance budgeting, strategic planning, and managerial modernization. Third generation studies have provided a more nuanced picture, expanding on these classifications. In some contributions focusing on administrative traditions, the Scandinavian countries have been presented as representatives of a distinct politico-administrative system (Peters 2008, Painter and Peters 2010: 20); the Scandinavian model. The notion of a Scandinavian model or tradition is not well developed in the literature. The different Scandinavian countries also seem to differ widely (Peters 2001, Hansen 2011), but they combine the Rechtsstaat orientation towards the law with a strong universal welfare orientation (Painter and Peters 2010) Scandinavian countries are unitary states, centralized but also decentralized (Premfors 2003, Baldersheim and Rose 2010). In addition, state-society relations are characterized by corporatism as well as extensive participatory networks and a strong welfare orientation with extensive commitments to equity and equality (Painter and Peters 2010, Peters 2001). They are considered consensual and decentralized countries (Lijphard 1999) with a distinct policy style and reform trajectory characterized by bargaining and incrementalism. Consensus politics is permeated by bargaining with many opportunities for a variety of actors to influence policies as well as many veto points. Thus a connection could be made between regime characteristics and incremental reform processes (ibid.)

However a recent test of structural approaches in a comparative study of higher education reform policies in 7 European countries, suggest a more nuanced picture (Bleiklie and Michelsen 2012). The results demonstrated that there is no straightforward unequivocal relationship between politico-administrative regimes and reform activity, and that each regime offers possible paths to high as well as to low reform activity. We concluded that a politico-administrative regime offers different sets of options for reform processes that may limit or be exploited by actors who may want to promote, to slow down or prevent reforms from being introduced.

Policy sector characteristics and regime characteristics could be explored in a similar manner. This path leads towards exploring higher education policy sector dynamics and structures. Policies, institutional setups and structures vary within a particular country, albeit to a different extent and remain lodged in different set-ups, norms and traditions of governance (Peters 2010, Lodge 2010). Higher education and universities in particular have
historically been perceived as a specific type of sector. Comparative studies of higher education policies and regimes indicate that the policy field shares the characteristic of not being strongly contested in many countries. Changes in the political composition of parliaments and executives have only occasionally led to noticeable policy change (Kogan et al. 2006). This might be taken as an indicator of the relative insulation of the higher education policy sectors from national “high politics”. A technical low conflict definition of an issue or a policy field allows delegation of authority to the administrative apparatus. Still there is much to suggest that higher education has evolved into a testing ground for administrative reform policies, although arguably under peculiar conditions offered by the higher education policy sector (Ferlie et al. 2009). As the higher education sector has grown in size and consumes an increasing share of public budgets, politicians have become more interested in the sector, and the emphasis on integrating higher education and research in the economy as a source of economic growth and innovation has increased accordingly (Bleiklie and Byrkjeflot 2002; Nowotny et al. 2001). Still administrative policies seem to remain the main habitat for the administrative apparatus.

The Scandinavian countries offer a nice possibility for within regime comparison at the sector level. In what sense can we argue that the Scandinavian countries belong to the same regime? To what extent do the higher education sectors appear to reflect characteristics of the national politico-administrative regimes?

This regime literature ends up observing how policies vary across regime types, and how these variations can be explained by specific structural conditions that represent different opportunities and constraints for policy change and reform, such as high or low levels of reform activity. If we are correct in assuming that actors can take advantage of the opportunities in different ways, we need to know more about the actors and how they make their choices. Historical institutional approaches address these questions by focusing on actual policy making processes and the actors who in practice shape the decisions that are made. Furthermore historical institutionalism focuses on how present policies and the actors are affected and constrained by existing institutional arrangements. Historical institutionalism emphasizes the stability of institutional arrangements – that often explain why national higher education systems and individual institutions develop peculiarities that tend to remain stable over long periods of time explained by “path dependency” (Streeck
and Thelen 2005; Pierson 2004). Existing arrangements may change, however, and historical institutionalism has developed ways in which both drastic, abrupt change and gradual change processes can be explained. We will focus on the former because it is relatively easy to identify the kind of (abrupt and politically visible) change that occur at critical junctures and then shape characteristics of governance arrangements in path dependent ways that are likely to manifest themselves as typical characteristics distinguishing one particular system from another (Pierson 2004). However we are also open to the possibility that more gradual and minor forms of change may have significant implications and lead to far greater and encompassing change than originally intended (Streeck and Thelen 2005). This kind of approach allows us to deepen and fill in the picture sketched by the regime approach above, and to focus on the role of the administrative apparatus and how its characteristics may vary across nations belonging to the same regime and to what extent this specifically affect higher education governance in the Scandinavian countries.

The focus on institutional arrangements differs from studies of partisan politics and it adds dynamism to the regime perspective. It moves from structure, perceptions and practices as regards the proper role of the state and state society relations to policy processes and their outcomes in terms of organizational arrangements. Rather than assuming a one to one relationship between political party preferences and policies, the focus is on actual processes and their participants. Thus one would ask questions such as: by whom are reform bills drafted and adopted? What role do ministries and other civil service agencies play in policy making and implementation over time? What is the relationship between universities and the state? How is internal governance systems organized?

Scandinavian higher education governance

All Scandinavian countries have fairly similar higher education systems in the sense that they belong to what Ansell (2013 : 165ff) calls the Mass Public Model, characterized by relatively high enrollment rates, by being almost entirely public and supported by high funding levels and massive public investments in higher education and research. There is relatively little political disagreement about the core issues of enrollment, subsidization and cost. In this
sense Scandinavian higher education policies mirror the welfare orientation and relative consensus about certain core questions related to the prominent role of public higher education. However, beyond these areas of relative consensus, obvious areas of divergence and variation should also be noted. We shall now present a brief analysis of Scandinavian higher education systems and their governance arrangements at national and institutional level. By means of the perspectives presented above, we will analyze the different characteristics of the systems following the same sequence as we did in the above conceptual discussion. After a brief empirical overview of some characteristics of Scandinavian university governance, we ask three questions: To what extent does Scandinavian higher education governance converge around the same model? To what extent can similarities and differences be understood or interpreted as products of partisan politics in crucial reform processes, of regime characteristics, path dependencies and change whether it be at critical junctures or of a more gradual nature.

Scandinavian university governance – similarities and differences

Until 1960 there were eight universities in Scandinavia, two each in Denmark (Copenhagen, Aarhus) and Norway (Oslo, Bergen) and four in Sweden (Uppsala, Lund, Stockholm, Gothenburg). Since then, higher education in all three countries has gone through enormous changes. The idea that universities have been insular institutions removed from their surroundings seems far from the reality of institutional development over the last five decades in terms of size (catering to about 50% as opposed to a few per cent of the population), integration (from a few single institutions to integrated higher education systems consisting of a varied mix of institutions under one common legislation, degree- and funding systems). During this period universities in all three countries have undergone several major reforms that have reshaped their governance systems beginning with “democratization” of the governance systems during the 1970s. Since the late 1980s, various reforms have been introduced that all have been justified in terms of neoliberal New Public Management ideologies reshaping the institutional structure through mergers, funding reforms and modes of regulation. In all three countries government initiated reforms have been important in reshaping how the system and individual institutions are managed and major changes have taken place during the first decade of the 2000s. As a common denominator one might say that Scandinavian governments have been relatively active in
reshaping their higher education systems, but with considerable variation in terms of timing and emphasis of the reform activity. Scandinavian countries no longer stand out as “reluctant reformers” in a European context (Bleiklie and Michelsen 2013; Hansen 2011). In terms of governance arrangements, there are some important similarities in terms of policy movements both as to the relationship between the state and higher education institutions as well as to internal governance arrangements.

First of all, institutions are supposed to be more autonomous from the state than previously. Governments emphasize the ability of institutions to operate as “strategic actors” in order to acquire external resources, talent and prestige; and to generally strengthening their position on what is increasingly perceived as a market place. Formally Danish universities enjoy, as independent foundations, a higher degree of autonomy than Norwegian and Swedish universities which continue to be civil service institutions. However, in all three countries ministries tend to monitor rather than to steer educational development, and universities enjoy more autonomy than previously with regard to budget decisions and hiring policies. In addition to legislation state steering takes place through a range of mechanisms. Steering relationships between state and institutions are enacted through funding mechanisms, negotiations, consultations, contracts, agreement, targets and trust. The legal framework is less important as a steering tool. As for funding all three countries have adopted some version of formula funding characterized by a basic grant, a result based grant in addition to an increasing share of external competitive funding for universities. The formulas vary however, as Norwegian universities receive a higher proportion of their income as a public basic grant than Danish and Swedish universities and the latter receive the highest share of competitive (public) funding (de Domincis et al. 2011). Another system level trend is the tendency to institutional mergers. Waves of institutional mergers have swept all three countries at various times and to various degrees, during the 1990s and 2000s, mostly inspired or mandated by government initiatives.

Governance arrangements within the institutions have been reformed as well during the 2000s in all three countries. The expressed values that have motivated reforms have been almost identical and may be summarized by the concepts of quality, efficiency and relevance. In addition the focus of reforms have been similar in different periods: expansion
and democratization during the 1960s and 1970s, integration of teaching oriented and vocationally oriented institutions during the 1980s, strengthening leadership, management and stakeholder influence during the 1990s, the Bologna process, further managerial reforms and initiatives to strengthen elite research during the 2000s. One of the common features is that boards with external representatives appointed by the ministries and with representation from internally elected academic staff and students have been established in all three countries. Although it is possible to identify common trends in the development of university governance systems, the timing and organizational solutions that have been chosen in the respective countries have varied considerably. This can be illustrated by the timing and shape of institutional boards for universities (higher education institutions). While Sweden introduced university boards with external representation already in 1977, they were introduced in Norway in 1995 and in Denmark in 2003. The composition of the boards reveals in addition a different understanding of the mission of the university and how they best can be managed as public institutions. While Danish arrangements already during the 1980s represented the most clearly expressed attempt to combine university autonomy with strong central steering, Norwegian arrangements have been more inclined to maintain participatory arrangements although they are now counterbalanced by stronger managerial structures and leadership mandates (Kyvik and Ødegård 1990). The Swedish development has been gradual, during which university boards have wrested control over the chairmanship from the vice chancellors and then over the recruitment of vice chancellors from the faculty, and gradually started to recruit vice chancellors from outside the institutions (Engwall 2007).

**Similarities and differences explained**

**Party politics.** In all three countries government initiated reforms have been important in reshaping how the system and individual institutions are managed and major changes have taken place during the first decade of the 2000s. Scandinavian countries no longer stand out as “reluctant reformers” in a European context (Bleiklie and Michelsen 2013; Hansen 2011). In terms of governance arrangements, there are some important similarities both regarding the relationship between the state and higher education institutions as well as to internal governance principles. To what extent could these changes be attributed to partisan politics? NPM reforms are often seen as part of the neo-liberal agenda after the 1980s, and
it could be suggested that these reforms were implemented at times with right-wing or centre-right governments rather than centre-left governments. In the literature on education there has been a strong tendency to ascribe this reform movement to the increasing power of the Right (Telhaug et al. 2006).

If we look at government incumbency similar developments could be identified in all three countries. In Norway the Social Democratic Party, was the largest party in parliament since the election in 1927 up to the 2009 election, but right-wing parties have assumed a greater role in politics since the 1980s onwards. From 1981 to 1997 governments alternated between minority Social Democrat governments and Conservative led centre-right governments (Green-Pedersen 2002). The Swedish Social Democratic Party has played a similar leading role in politics since the interwar period. Only five general elections in 1976, 1979, 1991, 2006 and the latest in 2010 provided the basis for a centre-right government. Denmark had right-wing governments from 1982 to 1993, and again from 2001-2009 – a total of 19 years. Thus the Right in Denmark has held power for a much longer period. There is also much to suggest that the liberal party has held considerably more clout than in Sweden during this period. But does this mean that the Scandinavian countries have embraced the NPM issue differently? Generally, Sweden seems to be one of the countries where NPM ideas have had a fairly strong impact, greater than in Norway and Denmark. It might look surprising that Sweden, normally regarded as the most ‘social democratic’ country in Scandinavia, would take the NPM drive to a further extent than, for instance, Denmark and Norway, which have had a stronger legacy of political liberalism. The extent to which the social democratic party played a role in this development has not been much focused in this research. Green-Pedersen (2009) holds that the explanation for the variation could be found in the different strategies of the social democratic parties. In Denmark, the Social Democrats have opposed market-type reforms, whereas in Sweden, they have been much more open towards these ideas. Also policies and practices for corporatist disengagement has been more focused (Rothstein 2010).

Still questions about the specificity of the higher education sector remain. In general, educational issues have been high on the political agenda in all three countries. But higher education issues have not been in the eye of the political storm. Until now, higher education has remained an undisputed endless frontier for educational expansion and the integration
of increasing numbers of students for all social strata. What has changed is located in the field of administrative policies, which in general bears the mark of low policies rather than high. In this field the level of partisan political conflict has been rather low, and all parties seem open towards new ideas for the reorganization of governance systems. This suggests the possibility of addressing a broader set of issues which analyzing the political partisan dynamics in higher education which goes beyond the question of redistributive conflicts and integrates the changing relations between the state and the public sector in the form of administrative policies.

Regimes, path dependencies and critical junctures. The above considerations lead us to suggest the possibility that higher education policy, or at least important aspects of it, has been rather insulated from party politics and consequently has been left to the civil service and the institutions. If this is true we may find that variation across Scandinavian higher education institution are better explained by general or sector specific administrative traditions than by party politics.

When we look at the organizational arrangements at the central government level and the agencies responsible for regulating and steering higher education, variation is a striking feature. This holds true whether we are referring to the role of politicians, the ministry and other agencies such as directorates, research funding, evaluation agencies and the size and composition of reform commissions. Since universities are or have been until recently part of the civil service, one possible explanation is that national administrative traditions have developed along somewhat different paths in the wake of the transition from autocratic monarchy to more representative forms of rule during the 19th century. Sweden established e.g. the tradition of small ministries and large administrative directorates under, but at arms length’s distance from ministerial control, including formal limitations on the ministers’ and the ministries’ right to interfere with decisions made by the directorates. The purpose was to keep the bureaucracy beyond the reach of royal executive power. Thus the bureaucracy became and still is a stabilizing element in Swedish politics, through an arrangement that also contributed to integrating universities in the public administration and limiting their autonomy (Bleiklie 1994). Danish history is somewhat different. After the introduction of representative rule certain tasks and responsibilities remained under royal control.
Universities were among them. When they later were transferred to the ministry they still remained at arm’s length from ministerial control (Hansen 2011). Norwegian universities can look back at a more ambiguous historical legacy. During the 19th century until parliamentary rule was established from 1884, the parliament fought for an autonomous civil service, including the university, in order to keep the bureaucracy at arm’s length from executive authority. After 1884 when it gained control over the executive these policies were reversed and parliament also demonstrated it’s willingness to interfere quite directly in university affairs. Thus in all three countries choices that were made at critical junctures in their political history shaped state-university relationships and led them onto paths that still contribute to the different degrees of autonomy that characterizes Danish, Norwegian and Swedish autonomy (Jacobsen 1964). Differences in how universities are led, in funding mechanisms and evaluation systems may similarly be seen in the context of sector level traditions that influence strongly national arrangements in a policy field that have lived it’s life in relative insulation from parliamentary ‘high politics’.

Conclusion

The analysis above allows us both to answer the three questions we raised in the introduction and at the same time discuss some of the theoretical implications that follow from the analysis. A very rough answer to the question about similarities and differences among the higher education systems of the three countries is this.

They Scandinavian higher education systems are very similar and we may put them under the common label of a Scandinavian Model of higher education when we consider the publicness, the massive investments and the emphasis of extending access to the entire population. This similarity can best be explained as the outcome of partisan politics and how political coalitions were established in all of the Scandinavian countries in support of the redistributive effects of heavy investments in a public higher education system.

When we consider the variation in state-institution relationships, and the organization of governance arrangements differences were more striking than similarities. In this context
the label of a Scandinavian model seem less relevant. The differences we observed are probably best explained in terms of path dependencies and evolving administrative traditions.
References


Degn, L. and Sørensen, M.P. (2013) From collegial governance to conduct of conduct – Danish universities set free in the service of the state. Paper for the ECPR General Conference, Bordeaux, 4-7 September 2013.


