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**Elitist turn in higher education in the context
of recent reforms in the Nordic countries**

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Abstract

The Nordic countries have been traditionally known as welfare states where egalitarian principles constituted the ideological backbone of the social transformation in the 20th century. Within the theoretical framework of post-industrial society the paper describes the redefinition of values, work and knowledge that provide a background for the elitist turn. The argument is linked to the discussion about the culture of new capitalism that can be observed in the public sector reforms in general. The policies realised in the higher education sector and discourses accompanying the reforms are analysed to exemplify the change in particular.

The analysis is placed within a broader framework of the social change within which the traditional social contract is being renegotiated. The paper attempts to show how the traditional collectivist mindset of the welfare state policy logic of the past gives way to greater individualism and acceptance of elitism in the Nordic societies. Although higher education in the Nordic countries is still mainly publicly funded and managed, an increasing emulation of the public sector and market-like behaviour can be witnessed. Therefore the analysis includes a theoretical discussion of the new contractual relationship of the whole public sector, which enables to capture the changing nature of the social relations in post-industrial societies.

The empirical part covers the most recent examples of the institutionalisation of the elitist thought as demonstrated by the drive for excellence in teaching and research and establishment of institutions that are expected to provide it. The analysis is comparative in nature and includes all five Nordic countries.

KAZIMIERZ MUSIAŁ

ELITIST TURN IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF RECENT REFORMS IN THE NORDIC COUNTRIES

Introduction

Nordic countries are widely known for their well developed and innovative educational systems. Very often they also attract attention due to money spent on scientific research and development that has been secured in the national budget. The correlation between R&D expenditure and growth of human and industrial capital are occasionally perceived as very inspiring, although not necessarily matching socio-economic realities of other countries. Nevertheless, the Nordic countries are often observed as specific laboratories of social development, which is also a result of a typical for the 1960-ties and 1970-ties fascination with the so-called Swedish or Scandinavian model. Partially due to this tradition of thought, and partially because of the noticeable success in combining social egalitarianism with effectiveness of a highly developed market economy in the last decades, the Nordic countries continually evoke interest. In spite of the achieved level of affluence they cannot be accused of heading for stagnation but, on the contrary, they appear highly innovative in the process of adapting their public sector to the arising new challenges and they actively create the culture of new capitalism [Senet 2006: 17].

With respect to higher education in the Nordic countries, the most characteristic feature of the recent years has been a growing tendency to evaluate all forms of educational and research activity, with roots in the discourse of quality improvement in the name of providing the best level of education and excellent research results. Emergence of such terms as “the best” and “excellent” with reference to research and education units, promotes a new way of thinking and makes those institutions be perceived as exceptional and elite. In order to make higher education institutions reach the highest or even elite level, new management mechanisms were introduced, following the developments in the rest of the public sector, to make it more efficient and its financing – more transparent and defined by rationally defined criteria. The experience and solutions of the Nordic countries with respect to evaluation and quality control

have been significant [Danø, Stensaker 2007], and might provide evidence for an elite position of a given country's higher education [Vabø, Aamodt 2008], though they should also be seen as a part of the broad wave of systemic and structural changes observable in many other highly developed countries as well.

This paper attempts to demonstrate that the contemporary discourse of elitism in the Nordic countries should be perceived as a logical consequence of the social development taking place in post-industrial societies, regardless of how strongly they had been permeated by the ideas of collectivism or social egalitarianism in the past. To this end reference will be made to a theory suggesting that Nordic welfare state is transformed into a welfare society. Consequences of this change are observable, for instance, in a discourse that promotes individualism in the personal perspective, and elitism in the institutional perspective. The examples illustrating attempts to institutionalize elitism in the Nordic countries' higher education have been taken from official sources published by governmental agendas of individual Nordic countries, from academic sources analyzing systemic reforms and, finally, from personal interviews conducted by the author with various stakeholders of higher education system in these countries.

Higher education in post-industrial societies – an element of social policy or an asset in the economic one?

Contemporary higher education policies reflect a twofold understanding of the role and function of higher education in society. The first way of looking at the university is deeply rooted in the tradition of this institution, perceived as a highly utilitarian establishment serving the public good and not necessarily subjected to market forces or exogenous interests. The other way of looking at the functioning of the university might be called 'market oriented', and this perspective constructs it as a market-based organization or a company. The latter orientation is often reflected in the appellation 'entrepreneurial university'. A historical perspective allows to comprehend the development of both orientations in the context of change of the university ideals, from a classical image of it as a republic of scholars, towards an interpretation of the university as an organization, where many stakeholders' interests have a decisive influence on its functioning and existence [Bleiklie, Kogan 2007: 477].

The first and more traditional way of looking at the university derives from the tradition of educating students not only in the sense of knowledge and skills but also to become a good

and loyal citizen. This utilitarian tradition functioned at the time when university education was not that universal and students that numerous. The model stipulated that the university was an organisation contributing to the common and public good, existing within the framework of the nation state and with all consequences and contingencies of this fact. Despite broad autonomy granted to institutions functioning within this framework, they play a utilitarian function to the society and formally remain instruments in the hands of the state that gives authorization and finances their activity. Such a university is accountable only to one stakeholder, the state, that also represents the society.

The other way of looking at the role and function of the university in the society is linked to the entrepreneurial university. This concept places the university within the operational field of the market forces and projects the university as a market-based company. Viewing the university as a company makes it a unit and a subject of economic analysis with all the instruments and terminology derived from the domain of economics, such as for instance, 'productivity', 'quality management', 'flexibility', 'efficiency' and 'output' or 'throughput'. Such a university may not only be described by economic indicators but it is relatively easy to construct a certain ideal type that acts according to the regulations and logic of the market.

The strategies of different Nordic countries that promote elitism in higher education institutions demonstrate that neither the traditional model of the university, nor the market-based one are sufficient to describe the dynamics of the current change. The support given to elite institutions is one of the means to meet the expectations of different stakeholders with respect to the higher education sector and, in this regard, represent the entrepreneurial model. At the same time, there still exists quite a great deal of traditional spirit at universities, which makes the change neither unequivocal, nor absolutely one directional.

Elite university as an answer to new social challenges

What is paradoxical in post-industrial societies, is a coexistence of different social trends and discourses that at first sight appear to be mutually exclusive. An example of such a paradox in the Nordic countries is an attempt to create or brand some higher education institutions as elite institutions, when at the same time the idea of social egalitarianism has not only become widely accepted as an ideal, but has also become commonly experienced social practice and

reality. Hence, in its very nature the discourse of elitism appears contradictory to the ideals and practice of the Nordic welfare states. Furthermore, it used to provide a framework of negative reference for a long time. Elitism evoked references to a class society and was portrayed as undesirable and at odds with the democratic ideas of the welfare state. As a result, until recently the Nordic countries have been famous for propagating equality and institutionalising egalitarian social practice both in their politics and social development. What, then, are the reasons in the recent years for which the Nordic countries have now started make appeals to elitism in the domain of higher education, both discursively and in the institutional practice of the reforming higher education landscape?

Undoubtedly, an increased attention to creating elite institutions that would be able to deliver cutting-edge and world-class research has been caused by an ever growing importance of this sector for the national economy and an ambition to raise competitiveness. Simultaneously the whole higher education and R&D sector have grown increasingly internationalised and ever more often one can witness attempts to hire, regardless of nationality, the best academics, researchers and students by the institutions aspiring to belong to the elitist group. This drive for elitism is fuelled by different rankings that promote the pursuit of the elite status to become a norm for the universities wanting to score high on educational market-place. Among many different rankings the Nordic countries focus on *Academic Ranking of World Universities Shanghai Jiao Tong University (SJTU)*, *Times Higher Education Supplement (THES)* and *Webometrics Ranking of World Universities (WRWU)*, which could be witnessed, for instance, in a report published by a special Norwegian government commission in 2008 [NOU 2008].

The rankings differ among each other by including different parameters in evaluating performance of a given university. In the case of SJTU the ranking includes 500 universities around the world and some 90% of the evaluation depends on parameters related to scientific research. THES ranks 400 universities and includes such parameters as academic peer-review (40%), research quality as based on the citations per faculty (20%), score based on proportion of international students and teachers (10%), score based on student faculty ratio (20%) and employer review (10%). WRWU ranks 4000 institutions and the basic criteria is their presence on the Internet, both as on-line publications, courses, databases, etc.

Apart from an obvious commercial reason behind the elite status of higher education institutions, it may be argued that turning to elitism to gain competitive advantage demonstrates a more profound social change taking place in the Nordic countries. Having analysed changes of Nordic higher education ideals Agnete Vabø and Per Olaf Aamodt suggest that the evolving discourse that promotes elite academic institutions possibly demonstrates changing expectations as to the role of higher education. The 'egalitarian' university was an indispensable institution of the *welfare state*, but in the post-industrial era the emerging *welfare society* is more keen to accept elitism as more fitting social pattern to realise individualised ambitions of particular members of society [Vabø, Aamodt 2008: 70]. If this diagnosis is correct, we currently witness a systemic redefinition of the basic values of the Nordic welfare state and in the discourse promoting elitism we can see a transition from the social democratic to a more liberal welfare regime resulting in a different social order.

The social democratic welfare model paid particular attention to the social function of higher education and provided equal chances for individuals within a relatively unified system that was managed and controlled by the state. A liberal welfare state regime, which we can witness in the USA or Great Britain, sees individual activity and choices made by individual citizens in the context of social capital growth and the primary goal of individuals is to adjust themselves to the market. With respect to education, adjusting oneself to the market requires diverse choices and individualised strategies, hence the state mostly abstains from direct steering of a unified higher education system and lets the students pursue their individual educational ambitions and goals. Under the influence of the market the students' educational ambitions and goals are expected to be ever more unique, exclusive and singular. It may well happen that with the liberal paradigm of social development becoming more pronounced and accepted, it will soon be elitism rather than egalitarianism that will become a cultural pattern better fitted to the post-industrial Nordic societies.

In the social debate of the Nordic post-industrial society, which refers both to the tradition and values nurtured by the welfare state, and to the alleged individualism of the welfare society, one can witness two coexisting discourses that arguably have an influence on the emergence of elite institutions in higher education. The first discourse reflects the demand for elitism among students and other stakeholders in higher education, while the other is a continuation of the traditional discourse about the role of higher education in the economic development of the nation state. Both discourses are discussed below, the other being more intensively

furnished with details and examples of how the elitist thought has been institutionalised in higher education systems of individual Nordic countries.

The demand for elitism among students and other stakeholders

Nordic welfare society as we know it today is still based on the tradition of community and subsidiarity, but globalisation and increasing multicultural diversity exert an ever growing pressure on residual values and institutions. Within the welfare state framework the higher education was an institution that guaranteed social and economic development based on the ideals of communitarian egalitarianism. Higher education institutions were, among others, tools to realise a mission of equalising chances for social advancement and development of all citizens within the welfare state that was regarded as a national common good. The university was a service institution, helping the state to realise its strategic goals, such as promoting and implementing the principles of social egalitarianism. In small and homogeneous Nordic societies the results of this service relationship between the state and higher education functioned relatively well.

There were good reasons for the state to take care of its higher education sector. At the time of welfare state development in the industrial era, the goals of education were to prepare good citizens and skilful workers who would function primarily within a national community and who should contribute to its economic development. The expansion of the welfare state in itself caused a greater demand for many, well educated employees. For many jobs in the public sector, especially in health service, social services and education, a formal education became a necessity to cross the threshold to the working life. Massification of higher education was the state's answer to the growing demand for well educated employees.

In the post-industrial era when many citizens enjoy collective wealth and individual affluence, it seems more natural to make use of the opportunity to individualise one's own educational options. With the transformation of the welfare state into the welfare society, individuals free themselves, at least partly, from the administrative machinery of the state. At the same time they become aware of new duties, responsibilities and expectations arising from the more liberal order of social relations with diminishing state responsibilities. This has a bearing on the goals and provision modes of higher education that also increasingly becomes an arena of

individual choices to provide the most competitive, tailor-made and individualised educational experience. Harland G. Bloland, an American professor of education who died in 2005, in the course of his life had observed and analysed increasing of post-modern tendencies in defining educational targets and noted how students at the turn of the millennium were made aware of the necessity to prepare themselves for a career including frequent changes of jobs and even professions [Bloland 2005: 131]. Post-modern students must be aware of the necessity constantly to update once acquired knowledge and, due to frequent changes of jobs, they have to take care of their health and pension schemes on their own. Such an awareness leads undoubtedly to changes of identity of the individuals who, facing postmodern insecurity, will make their educational choices in the name of the private good and private gain, rather than for the traditional public or common good of their national community.

These tendencies are certainly strengthened by a essential change in the content and aims of the study programmes under the influence of the signals received from the world of work. On the labour market the statistical figures of employability of graduates tell students to make early educational choices, develop their competitive advantage by building up an individualised curriculum portfolio in order to prove own uniqueness and singular qualifications. Such an attitude provides a fruitful ground for accepting elitist educational experience as a way to gain the competitive advantage over other participants of the educational process. As a consequence, sooner or later the need becomes urging to create 'elite' institutions that will provide – or promise to provide – 'elitist' education that gives hope for graduating with the best possible formal skills and competences in hand.

The more we experience massification of higher education, with the following downgrading of the formerly high status of higher education, the more explicit the pressure will be to create institutions and programmes which through their declared elite status should be able to compensate for the loss of the traditional status and prestige among the university graduates. The status and prestige of higher education in the past was founded not only on the formal education but also on the cultural advancement and progressive education, the so-called *Bildung*, both of which enabled graduates to be counted almost automatically among the elite of a given society. In the Nordic countries the *Bildung* aspect of higher education studies lost its importance almost entirely in the 1980s [Sejersted 1989: 356-58]. For the Nordic societies that in the past two decades have based their development more intensively on the knowledge

society paradigm, it is a package of state-of-the-art formal knowledge and exceptional vocational skills that has been regarded as a prerequisite to become a member of the new technocratic elite.

As an answer to the palpable demand for unique and elitist education among the students, many countries pay great attention to providing systemic solutions that will be able to satisfy students expectations. It is not a new phenomena but since students are treated as both internal and external stakeholders, or even customers [Musiał 2010: 48], adequate changes are made to present some institutions as attractive places to study. A typical solution practiced in several universities is selecting administrative units and awarding titles of centres of excellence in teaching and research in a given discipline. It is often carried out by a responsible ministry that organises a country-wide competition and nominates centres of excellence according to acknowledged criteria.

In Norway, for instance, it has been suggested to nominate Centres of Excellence in Teaching (*Sentre for fremragende undervisning*) and Centres for Excellent Vocational Education (*Sentre for fremragende profesjonsutdanning*) in the nearest future. They are to replace an award for the quality of teaching (*Utdanningskvalitetspris*) that has been awarded by the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) since 2001 [NOU 2008: 149 and 151-53]. Since 2007 Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (*Högskoleverket*) has developed a system of awarding exceptional basic units of universities with certificates of ‘excellent education centre’ (*framstående utbildningsmiljö*). A reform of this system has been underway now to award not only methodological innovativeness but also the learning outcomes [Högskoleverket 2009]. Over the last decade the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC) has awarded a number of different centres a centre of excellence status, like Centres of Excellence in University Education (*Yliopistokoulutuksen Laatuysiköt*), Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Research (*Koulutuksen ja Tutkimuksen Laatuysiköt*), Centres of Excellence in Polytechnic Education (*Ammattikorkeakoulujen Koulutuksen Laatuysiköt*), Centres of Excellence in Regional Development (*Alueellisen Kehittämisen Laatuysiköt*), Centres of Excellence in Adult Education (*Aikuiskoulutuksen Laatuysiköt*). Receiving the award has meant not only prestige but has been followed by additional funding from the ministry of education [Hiltunen 2009].

Elite universities and national economic development

One of the characteristics that becomes striking for when analysing post-industrial society is its significant or total decoupling from the production domain, i.e. when the term production is limited to the industrial production alone. Already earlier analyses of the post-industrial stage in the development of societies concentrated on the phenomenon of 'alienation' and not on improper utilisation of the means of production [cf. Touraine 1974]. If, at least theoretically, the post-industrial society has solved the problem of production, then the main burning issue remaining in the social life is the structure of power and its application, and not economic issues grounded in the possession of the means of production.

The perspective of post-industrial society possibly puts an end to the Marxist idea of social development as a result of class struggle. In a post-industrial society the main area of confrontation boils down to a conflict between the technocrats in the possession of power and those who are subjected to it [Peters 1992: 130]. It has a substantial bearing on the production sphere, in which both the means of production, as well as products and services have changed. The key resource of production in the post-industrial society is knowledge, while products and services are more and more intensively based on knowledge. Hence, research institutions and higher education institutions become some of the most important organisation that constitute a reservoir of knowledge denominated in new technologies and high level of innovativeness. These institutions are thus able to provide for competitive advantage of countries and societies where they are based.

Appreciation of the potential that research institutes and higher education may generate towards the creation of knowledge as the most important product of the post-industrial society, has resulted in re-discovering the usefulness of education and research for the needs of national economies. In most OECD countries an inter-institutional and international competition in fishing for best brains among the graduates and researchers can be witnessed. To this end a concentration of administrative and financial resources in larger and more productive research and educational units takes place, which is supported directly by national governments or within the already established structures of programmes managed by research foundations or different governmental agendas. Many countries institutionalise these efforts by supporting the so-called 'elite universities,' among which American and British

institutions arguably lead the way, but German *Exzellenzinitiative* as a programme and French *Paris School of Economics* as an institution may serve as equally good examples of the drive for institutional elitism in higher education.

Just like the word 'elite' has many connotations, the elitist turn is accompanied by conceptual inconsistency. Meanings associated with the term 'elite' are blurred when referring to an actually proven state-of-the-art quality of an institution or programme, or when denoting more traditional exclusiveness based on other criteria. Peter Maassen, a professor of the University of Oslo and one of the experts appointed to report on the state of Norwegian higher education in 2008, suggested that the term 'elite university' should be used to denote institutions concentrating mainly on research and less on teaching. A further argument for a cautious use of the term 'elite' is a possible association with exclusiveness and the admission limited to some privileged social groups only. However, the pragmatic aim of the new appellation for the institutions that score high with regard to scientific quality and research potential is that they should not "be for the elites" but "create elites" mainly within the domain of scientific research. For that reason Maassen suggested that the best coinage for the new institution would be 'top university' (*toppuniversitet*) rather than elite university [NOU 2008: 133-34].

Maassen's doubts about the elitism branded in the name are understandable since any association with exclusiveness or limiting access to social goods or services does not go well with the ideals of social and societal development in the Nordic countries. The main reason is that Nordic higher education systems have developed to a great extent on the social democratic ethos of social egalitarianism, with higher education institutions constituting for a longer while an efficient instrument of social change. The institution of higher education has become one of the basic institutions of the welfare state when the massification of higher education in the 1960s and 1970s put an end to regarding university or college education as elitist or exclusive. If Michel Foucault's remarks on social reproduction [Foucault 1971] were to be used in the Nordic context, it would be possible to maintain that universities, as institutionalised units of the state apparatus, secured a relatively unproblematic reproduction of the Nordic societies. This is perhaps the most important reason why the drive for institutional elitism in Nordic higher education is accompanied all the time by an echo of the ideals of social egalitarianism. In a comparative European perspective the rhetoric of institutional change towards elite universities in the Nordic countries still balances between a

full-hearted support for the best institutions and paying tribute to egalitarianism as a founding principle of the welfare state.

When looking at the solutions applied in the individual Nordic countries, one notices a differentiation of means and pace as to how the balancing act between egalitarianism and elitism has been realised. For instance, in Norway it still seems difficult to declare elite status of the best universities and institutes. In a similar vein, Sweden seems to prefer the idea of equality of all higher education institutions over the elite status of only few of them. Denmark, on the other hand, has decided to point at three ‘super universities’ as the most elitist in their system and Finland has experimented with establishing an elite university in the Helsinki area. Nevertheless, despite the dominating notion of egalitarianism in Norway and Sweden, in the first case one can witness concentrating financial means in centres of research excellence (*Sentre for fremragende forskning*), in which it is hoped to generate world-class research in few selected areas. Furthermore, one should not forget promoting institutional elitism understood as raising quality within the already existing structures, as realised in Norway, Finland and Sweden in the shape of centres of excellence in education and teaching. As a systemic solution one can see rather promotion of the elite status of smaller structures, such as basic units, rather than putting an ‘elite’ label to the whole university.

Despite a rather infrequent use of the very wording that could connote elitism when introducing changes in Nordic higher education, it is possible to discern structural changes that prove a growing acceptance of a system with elite institutions. Some researchers of higher education in the Nordic area speak openly about an ‘elitist turn’ that can be observed in the branding activities practiced by institutions like University of Oslo or Norwegian School of Economics and Business Administration in Bergen, which do much to prove their exceptional and elite status in Norway [Vabø 2009]. It leads to stratification which, although officially unintended, is caused by attempts to attract new research resources and more students. The elitist turn in Nordic higher education becomes a social fact, though the motivation of the institutional actors are different, which results in different timing and advancement of this process in the cases presented below.

Denmark – structural reforms and greater institutional autonomy

From a comparative perspective Denmark has carried out the most profound and far reaching higher education reforms that can be interpreted as furthering institutional elitism in the Nordic countries. In particular it is demonstrated by numerous mergers among the universities and the independent research institutions. The official argument for the reforms has been that only mergers can allow to utilise the effect of scale and produce education and research at the highest international level. Academic and research milieus are to become stronger and more competitive in order to meet the challenge of the unfolding globalisation.

The framework for mergers that are to contribute to achieving an elite status of Danish higher education in the future is the so-called globalisation strategy that was delivered by the Globalisation Council (*Globaliseringsråd*) and accepted by the Danish government in March 2006. The strategy stipulates quite detailed measures with regard to higher education institutions [Regeringen 2006: 62-72]. The seventh chapter of the strategy has been entitled “World-class universities” and it includes nine different measures which should guarantee that “Danish universities will be able to rank among the best universities in the world” and that “universities will carry out research at a world-class level and will gain a position among the best in the world in the application of research findings for new technologies, processes, goods and services” [Regeringen 2006: 62].

Mergers between universities and specialist research institutes have been based on a formula of an ‘enforced free choice’, which has been guaranteed by the government through including clauses in the development contracts (*udviklingskontrakter*) between the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation and the universities. Financial incentives and contracting research and educational activities have been the most efficient way of implementing the structural changes. As a result, 12 universities and 13 sector research institutes merged to create 11 new institutions as of January 1, 2007. Furthermore, the majority of financial resources (97%) has been allocated to seven universities, out of which some 75% of means is ear-marked for three ‘super universities’, i.e. University of Copenhagen, University of Aarhus and Danish Technical University. On the grounds of the mergers they have also become home for 10 research institutes [Kunnskapsdepartementet 2009: 228].

On August 1, 2007, teacher training colleges, nursing colleges and other vocational colleges educating at the first level, were merged into eight university colleges (*professionshøjskoler*). From January 1, 2008 they merged further with regional higher education centres, the so-called CVU (*Centre for Videregående Uddannelser*), which was meant to create qualitatively better and stronger centres educating in the vocational domain at the higher education level [*Bekendtgørelse af lov om professionshøjskoler for videregående uddannelser 2009*]. Unlike the universities that are supervised by the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation, the university colleges are under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and are not independent legal entities.

The division of labour between universities and university colleges is clear and it is up to the universities to realise the mission of securing Danish higher education an elite status by way of delivering world-class research. The universities are the main addressees of the government's globalisation strategy, with statements that "elite educational programmes should provide a challenge to the brightest students" and "universities must have more autonomy in attracting the most gifted researchers" [Regeringen 2006: 63]. Especially the latter issue makes the Danish solutions conspicuous among the Nordic countries, as it allows for greater autonomy in hiring procedures and leaves more financial resources in the hands of the universities to be able to negotiate with the best academics available in a given discipline world-wide. It is worth mentioning that since 2003 Danish universities are no longer institutions of the public sector but have a status of the so-called 'self-owning institutions' of public law. This makes it possible to use institutional assets to fulfil their missions in a more autonomous way. The governance mechanism based on the governing board consisting of the majority of external stakeholders allows them more easily to negotiate contracts with all stakeholders of higher education system.

Finland – structural changes and rising research funding

Finland has a binary system of higher education, consisting of systemically and institutionally separated 20 universities and 29 vocationally oriented polytechnics. The currently valid government plan for development of education and research for the years 2007-2013 does not foresee changes in the structural division, which means that universities will continue to focus on both education and research and polytechnics will pay more attention to the application of

the acquired knowledge [Finnish Ministry of Education 2008]. However, in the recent years both the universities and the polytechnics have been pressed to increase their competitiveness in order to be successful in application for financial means available on contractual basis and in open competition.

In the above mentioned government plan for the development until 2012 it is hard to find traces indicating any turn towards creating elite institutions. The only mention suggesting active support to the cutting-edge research and achievements of the Finnish scholars is in the domain of technology. In this domain universities and polytechnics are to be used to underline the leading position of Finland internationally. It is signalled that polytechnics should receive more financial autonomy in order to individualise the recruitment system and enhance the level of human capital in the engineering sciences [Finnish Ministry of Education 2008: 57].

Despite the fact that the above mentioned government priorities are not precisely defined in official documents, in the recent years a number of cooperation initiatives and mergers between some smaller research units, regional universities and polytechnics was initiated, especially in the Helsinki area. The most spectacular and aspiring to institutional elitism has been a project of the so-called *The Innovation University*, realised since 2004. The first step was made in 2005-2007 when *Helsinki School of Creative Entrepreneurship* was created, which was a pioneering attempt to connect the technical universities of the metropolitan area with the business representatives and other external stakeholders. On this basis on January 1, 2010 a merger of the Helsinki University of Technology, Helsinki School of Economics and University of Art and Design Helsinki took place, giving rise to Aalto University (*Aaltoyliopisto*). What was even more spectacular was an extraordinary financial support received from the state in the volume of 500 million Euro as a foundation capital (out of 700 mil Euro in total), which gives the state a majority share in this university started as a foundation [*Aalto University Presentation* 2009].

Merging higher education institutions and research institutes into new institutional structures in the name of creating unique and elite higher education units in Finland has been made easier thanks to the newly passed administrative reform that makes universities much more autonomous in their strategic decision-making. New Universities Act was passed on June 16, 2009 and, most significantly, it put an end to the tradition of universities functioning as a part and an instrument of the state administration [Finnish Ministry of Education 2009]. The reform made universities independent legal entities, which were to decide whether they would

act as corporations of the public law or foundations of the private law. Autonomous universities have now got the right to decide about their strategic research directions, about possible mergers with other units, and they have been given more freedom in acquisition of research funds that can be used according to the development strategy accepted by the institution.

Although not so long ago calling a higher education institution in Finland as elitist would be politically incorrect, creation of the Aalto University as a ‘premier league university’ [Puttonen 2007], with a substantial capital contribution from the state, undoubtedly signals an elitist turn in thinking about how higher education sector may be made more efficient. The largest and the most prestigious university in Finland, the University of Helsinki, has not participated in creating Aalto University and it expressed doubts, claiming that it may cause further and unnecessary competition when applying for the limited funds granted by the government for scientific research. Doubts of the University of Helsinki must be taken seriously as in Finland it dominates the research landscape in most disciplines and it is the only Finnish university that has been ranked on the Jiao Tong Academic Ranking list (placed as 68th in the world in 2008 as compared to 73rd position in 2007). Simultaneously it has been ranked as 19th in Europe in 2008, advancing from 22nd position in 2007) [Top 100 European Universities 2009].

However, the doubts of the most prominent university as to the administration of the limited research resources may not be fully substantiated. In the 2007 programme of Matti Vanhanen government for its second term in office one could read about plans to raise R&D spending up to 4% of GDP in both public and private sector. The declaration included also raising research subsidies for universities and abstaining from taxing research grants [Finnish Government 2007]. It was also clearly stated that financing rising excellence should be given priority in disciplines in which Finland has already achieved a very good rank. The strategy promoted also quality improvement of Finnish research output and stimulated greater engagement of the private capital in research.

Iceland – a dominant status of one university

The domination of the University of Iceland over other institutions in the higher education system of Iceland causes that any science or research policy is difficult to imagine without participation of academics coming from this university. Also in the case of this institution the drive for institutional elitism is noticeable, inasmuch as in recent years moves have been made to concentrate research base and strengthen the research potential through restructuring based on mergers of smaller institutions with the University of Iceland. In 2008 the most obvious example of this trend was a merger with the Iceland University of Education that itself had been founded on a basis of a merger of three smaller education colleges in 1998. The merger was motivated primarily by enhancing the research component of the educational studies and motivating academic teachers to advance quicker in their academic career and boost individual research potential [Jónasson 2009].

Moreover, being aware of its unique position the University of Iceland actively promotes its activities and competence on international arena. Before the financial crisis struck Iceland, the university had been able to secure quite advantageous and profitable educational and research contracts with the Ministry of Education and carried out an internal restructuring, like for instance division into schools as based on the Anglo-Saxon model. A declared long-term goal behind the reform has been an ambition to be ranked among one hundred of the best universities in the world. Application of the internationally recognised quality standards is to guarantee that research degrees awarded at the university should be recognised world-wide and quality of the study programmes leading to it should be recognised as world-class by the students [University of Iceland 2008: 7].

Norway – slow institutional stratification and a veiled discourse of elitism

According to the report of a special commission dealing with the new structure of higher education in Norway [NOU 2008], with respect to creating elite institutions the country paddles against the stream that currently dominates European higher education. Academic community reacted sceptically to the different scenarios presented by the commission, which suggested concentrating research resources and merging institutions [Vabø, Aamodt 2008: 68]. According to the commission no institution of higher education in Norway could be

called “elite university” in the sense of world-class institution in scientific research. This situation is allegedly a result of the traditional Norwegian university development model that adheres to the Humboldtian tradition, giving preference to broad rather than specialised education, with many disciplines and a balanced relationship between research and teaching.

Still, the government’s intention to promote state-of-the-art scientific research can be observed since 2001 when a mechanism for creating Norwegian Centres of Excellence (*Sentre for fremragende forskning*) was developed. Its financing has been based on the funds of the Norwegian Research Council and has aimed at supporting the best Norwegian researchers, with an implicit goal of making their achievements better visible on the international arena. The mechanism was to stimulate emerging research milieus that should carry out long-term basic research at the international level. It was expected that also foreign scholars would be attracted to these centres while Norwegian researchers should gain an excellent opportunity to advance with their work. The first round of applications in 2002 gave rise to 13 centres of excellence, with a wide spectrum of disciplines and institutions. The time framework for financing the centres has been ten years with a mid-term research evaluation exercise. The centres have received between 6 and 20 million NOK of yearly support, while the institutions that host the centres cover the maintenance costs of the premises. In 2006 eight new centres were selected and they should receive 800 million NOK in the period of ten years [NOU 2008: 135-136].

Centres of Excellence significantly raise the research potential of the hosting institutions and promote, at least some of them, to the premier league of scientific research. University of Oslo hosts currently eight centres of excellence, which allows it to score highly in different rankings, and at the same time stimulates it to furnish its development strategy with plans for more research projects to be hosted by the university. Hosting centres that receive most of their resources from the mechanism managed by the Research Council allows the university to direct own resources to its “close-to excellent” research institutes in order to raise their potential and thus help them to reach the status that will be rewarded by additional external funding in the future. Centres of Excellence are selected on the basis of their competitive advantage when compared to other institutions in a given discipline, their ability to answer pressing social needs in a given discipline and, finally, on their development potential and cooperation with other research centres [NOU 2008: 135].

Apart from Oslo the elitist ambitions can be noted also in NTNU in Trondheim (*Norges teknisk-naturvidenskabelige universitet*), which by year 2020 wants to become one of ten universities in Europe that lead rankings in technical and natural sciences and count among the elite 1% of the best institutions in the world. This position is to prove a long-term strategy that has been realised for over a decade now. The third Norwegian university that does not hide its ambitions to become an elite institution is University of Bergen. It officially declares its plan to become “a research institution at an international level and leading in selected research disciplines” [NOU 2008: 135]. Although without much chance to reach excellence status in international rankings, the universities in Tromsø, Stavanger and Agder in their development strategies also include plans to concentrate research priorities in order to reach the status of national centre of excellence in some research fields.

The resources available within the mechanism that promotes Norwegian Centres of Excellence make the universities concentrate efforts on adjusting their structure and infrastructure to the criteria that should guarantee a successful application. The mechanism causes also, in most cases, a mobilisation of individual researchers and raising quality of a given institution at the national level. Institutional changes are accompanied by a veiled discourse of institutional elitism, which is often used in the public relations and promotion campaigns of a given institution. Expressions like ‘a leading research institution’ representing ‘the highest international level’ become metaphors used to describe institutional reality of a given setting, both with respect to the real description as well as in order to present development plans and strategies and attract students.

Sweden – fewer universities and better financing of research

When in 2007 the overall number of higher education institutions reached 36, out of which 14 had a status of a university, the necessity of mergers to enhance competitiveness of individual institutions became a topic of the discussions on the shape of Swedish academia. The discussion was triggered partly by Anders Flodström, a newly nominated director of *Högskoleverket*, i.e. Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, who suggested a reduction in the number of universities from 14 to 5. In his opinion mergers were the only way to concentrate the resources and make it possible for the Swedish research and

researchers to compete with the USA and China. His recommendation was buttressed by the fact that Finland and Denmark arguably also headed in the same direction with their reforms [Wallström 2007].

The debate that followed Flodström's statement demonstrated that neither Swedish public opinion, nor the academic community were straightforwardly against the recommended solutions, especially with respect to the concentration of resources for research and raising its quality. However, the opinions were less favourable as to forcing mergers of smaller, regional institutions that so far had played a very important role in their local communities. Even if the mergers could possibly be justified as a means to economise and make the whole system more efficient, there were doubts as to the number and placement of the remaining big institutions. The suggestion was to spread them evenly on the whole Swedish territory and what was to remain were institutions in Södra Sverige, Västsverige, Linköping/Norrköping, Stockholm/Mälardalen i Norrland.

Mergers of higher education institutions into bigger units have happened parallel to the ongoing public debate, even though it has been a slow process, not necessarily matching the intention of the decision makers. For instance, Växjö University and Kalmar University College signed an agreement and became Linnaeus University (*Linnéuniversitetet*) on January 1, 2010, but institutions in central Sweden, such as recently established Mälardalen University and Örebro University coordinated their management and negotiated institutional federation, which in the end failed by the end of 2008 [Ax 2007, Ax 2008]. In the north of Sweden the Luleå University of Technology and Umeå University coordinated their cooperation with respect to the realisation of their third mission [Umeå universitet 2008], but so far no agreement has been reached to materialise the Norrland University on the basis of their merger. The Swedish government does not press universities and colleges to merge but uses rather financial incentives to reward changes, as it was the case with Växjö and Kalmar receiving 20 mil. kroner to complete their merger.

Nevertheless, it would be misleading to look for proofs of the elitists turn in Swedish higher education and research only in institutional mergers. Undoubtedly, the elitist tune for the future is dictated by the suggested change in financing modes of higher education. It was proposed by the end of 2007 by a government commission headed by professor Dan Brändström, a former director of one of the largest Swedish research foundations *Riksbankens*

Jubileumsfond. Brändström suggested to redirect substantially research resources, so that more money should target fewer and only the best institutions. Furthermore, additional matching funds from the government should be given to those institutions that would have already received financing from the Swedish Research Council (*Vetenskapsrådet*) [SOU 2007].

Conclusion

From the perspective of many European countries, where economical and equal access to higher education still represents the main trend in thinking about the accessibility and utilisation of academia in the society, the experience of the Nordic countries are interesting to analyse. While the efficient use of higher education and research for the needs of the national economy may provide an attractive role model, the Nordic countries may appear even more attractive with respect to balancing the re-emerging elitist discourse with the widely accepted ideas of egalitarianism as the main principles of good governance. However, it may be difficult to apply the solutions of the Nordic countries elsewhere as we possibly deal with the solutions that are preconditioned systemically and culturally and for that reason must be reinterpreted or translated into different institutional practices and values of other societies. As claimed recently in a book edited by Kehm, Huisman and Stensaker (2009), the higher education reformers chase a moving target while it is possible to recognise the directions of change only when we recognise the systemic contingencies and understand the reasons behind the observed institutional phenomena.

In this context and with reference to the above reasoning, one must not forget that higher education reforms in the Nordic countries, like elsewhere, have been very closely connected with the transformations occurring in these societies at large. In its primary function the university in the Nordic area has been crucial to realise the individual educational aspirations and provided for skills and knowledge of individual members of the society. In its second function aimed at raising the value of the social capital, the university has been important for the state and treated as an instrument for raising prosperity and the overall level of life. Finally, in its function to realise the welfare state ideals, the university has been an institution promoting and implementing the ideas of social egalitarianism. In the golden years of the welfare state, i.e. in the 1960's and 1970's, the university became an instrument of state

interventionism, either by regulating the numbers of young and educated workforce on the job market, or by an exemplary realisation of the ideals of social equality, with reference to both social heritage or gender equality.

In the post-industrial era and with the conviction of an imminent crisis of the welfare state in the shape that has been promoted by the social democratic vision and social engineers after WW2, the university is no longer perceived so much as an instrument of social change but becomes one of the institutions of the public sector. It is particularly palpable in the management of the universities that become more and more autonomous institutions, with the traditional exogenous limitations being replaced by contractualism and self-reliance with respect to their economic foundations and institutional sustainability.

Nevertheless, the idea of the university having an essential role to play in equipping citizens in the knowledge and skills indispensable for the labour market is still alive. University is regarded to be a key institutions that helps to meet the challenge of the post-industrial society, especially when this society is defined as a knowledge-based one. The key competences that must be in the possession of a citizen include an ability to deal with the multitude of information as well as their creative and innovative utilisation. They are supposed to guarantee the individuals' success and affluence. These two latest issues are more and more often regarded as private goods rather than contributing to the social capital to be shared with the social group where one belongs to by birth or out of choice. From such an individualisation of one's own social role, with qualitative uniqueness and declared elitism as desirable components of the individuals' vocational portfolio, there is just a little step to accept institutional elitism as desirable in the long run. The evocations of elitism that can be heard within the discourse accompanying higher education reforms bear witness to elitist (re)turn taking place in the Nordic countries as well, notwithstanding the egalitarianism so far dominating in the Nordic welfare states.

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