

**Stakeholders in Higher Education  
- Old Ideas in New Bottles?**

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# **1. Research problem**

## **1.1. Introduction**

During the last 20 years there have been major changes in national policy regarding the governing of the public sector. The welfare state has been put under pressure as stable growth has been exchanged for budget deficits.

Since the late 1980s the private sector has been the role model for reforms in the public sector. The reforms are, among other things, characterised by market orientation, the use of contracts, performance assessment and management by objectives. The civil service is more often regarded as a provider of services and the citizens as clients or consumers. The main focus is on efficiency and effectiveness (Læg Reid & Christensen 2001). These reforms are gathered under the label New Public Management.

There are also many who argue that there has been a shift from government to governance; i.e. new relations between politics, administration and service production (Rhodes 1997, Ramsdal et al. 2000). The organising principle for governance is then horizontal self-organised cooperation in policy networks. Non-state actors and their role in governing society is emphasised as well as how the state may govern society by the organisation of public sector structures and processes (Sørensen 2002).

At the same time higher education meets a whole range of new demands. Questions about higher education's relevance in society and its legitimacy are ever more frequent. The societal assignment is no longer taken for granted and the relationship between higher education, state and society is not perfectly clear, if it has ever been (Olsen 2000). Norwegian policy documents emphasise, for example, relevance to business when it comes to quality in teaching and research (Ot.prop. nr. 79 (2003-2004)). But there is no consistent political view on what is regarded as quality. It is both a question of whether higher education institutions produce the knowledge with relevance to what the students need, as seen by the politicians, as well as whether the education itself is good enough.

Along with quality, efficiency is made a core value not only in public sector in general, but also in higher education specifically. A frequently used instrument for cutting costs and capping budgets in Norwegian higher education is activity planning.

Performance indicators, for example the number of entrance students and graduates, as well as research publications, have become decisive factors for funding (Bleiklie, Høstaker & Vabø 2000).

Higher education has gone from elite to mass education. There are two stages in this development (Bleiklie 1996). The first stage, from 1960 to 1980, was characterised by democratisation and bureaucratisation. The regional university colleges were established at the end of this period and contributed to a considerable growth. The second stage, the 1980s to the mid 1990s, was characterised by the expansion and integration of the educational system in general. The expansion of the regional university colleges continued and the universities continued to grow.

From the late 1960s higher education was used as an instrument in social welfare policy for achieving equality in society, a way to open up for social and economic mobility. Earlier the major task for the universities was to recruit the elite to the civil service and provide qualified professionals (Bleiklie, Høstaker & Vabø 2000). This is in line with Bleikli's description of the utility function of the university, which emphasises supplying society with qualified personnel and research that contribute to national growth (Bleiklie 1999).

University's classical role has been that of a cultural institution where its main purpose is free research and instruction. Bleiklie (1999: 509) points out that "the scientific activity is an emancipatory force in the development of open societies, [...]". This also comprises a social role where the universities are expected to preserve cultural heritage, cultivate citizenship and form the students' individual character (Gumport 2000). Furthermore a primary task of higher education is the preservation of knowledge itself and the knowledge community.

Much research about European higher education policy has shown a general shift from state control to state surveillance or supervision (Maassen & van Vught 1994 a.o.). During the last 10-15 years more central steering instruments have been supplemented and/or replaced by quasi-market instruments and self-regulation (Gornizka & Massen 2000). Consequently this mutually exclusive dualism of state control and state surveillance is no longer adequate as an analytical tool as long as more hybrid forms can be found. I will therefore make use of Olsen's article *The*

*institutional dynamics of (European) University* in which he outlines four models along two dimensions, autonomy and conflict (Olsen 2005).

## **1.2. Research problem (and questions)**

Bleiklie (2004 with reference to Neave 2002) claims that higher education institutions have gone from being autonomous collectivities to stakeholder organisations. This transformation brings about a change in power relations both within the universities and university colleges and between these institutions and their environments. This is due to the assumption that the institutions are being more attentive to the needs of stakeholders with regard to research and education.

I will argue that given the changes both in demands on higher education and in steering mechanisms, it is now profitable to take a closer look at how the influence of different actors may have changed over time.

Lately the notion of stakeholder has come up more frequently, not only in management literature, but in policy studies in general and higher education particularly (Maassen & Cloete 2002, Marstein 2003, Neave 2002, Nyseth & Ringholm 2004), a.o. The application of the term in management literature has had two main consequences for the companies and their relations to the environment. Actors and groups of actors that the companies have to take into consideration are extended. Furthermore the stakeholders' values and beliefs must be paid attention to (Neave 2002).

According to Maassen (2000) the notion of stakeholder can be connected to concepts of steering higher education. That makes it possible to take into account other actors and networks than the state and the higher education institutions. He also claims that the idea of stakeholder refers to an altered role for those who take part in the "national and institutional policy and governance matters as representatives for the external society" (op.cit.: 378). The assumption that the state no longer is the only important stakeholder in Norwegian higher education will have influence on to whom institutions are accountable and what legitimacy they possess.

The aim of the dissertation is to study stakeholding in relation to the governance of the university colleges in Norway. The overall question that this study will be dealing with is: how has the influence of the stakeholders been changed by changes in

governance mechanisms between 1970s and the present. Who are the stakeholders and what roles do they play?

Do changes in policy give other actors influence in areas where they did not have any influence before? Or is stakeholding and the stakeholder society just new and fancier terms for something that has existed earlier, though in a different form or to a different degree?

More specified questions guiding the study are (*tentatively*):

1. Which actors obtain influence in areas in which they have not had any or only limited influence before? Why is this?
2. Do the courses and research results meet the stakeholder demand?
3. If the overall objectives are not concurrent with those held by single actors, how do institutions balance between them and to whom are they accountable?

In order to explain the change in stakeholders' influence between 1970s and 2004, this dissertation will be based on the theoretical model of governance in higher education outlined by Olsen (2005). When it comes to steering higher education policy, one finds actors from three spheres in interaction; state, civil society and higher education institutions. But the constellations and mixtures will vary over time (Maassen 2000).

Stakeholder theory will be used as an analytical tool to study actors' influence. Neave (2002) regards the massification of higher education as one of the driving forces for the emergence of the stakeholder society. This is because mass education has changed the role of higher education in society. Thereby the role of the state is redefined, as well as to whom the universities and university colleges are accountable. One question is what the concept can add to the understanding of the changes taking place in higher education. Does it contribute to identify actors (in networks), to clarify who might have legitimate stakes, and to what stake(s) they might have? In this context, I will combine the theoretical framework with management literature and what is written more specifically on higher education literature.

## **2. Theoretical Approaches**

### **2.1. Governance models**

Olsen (2005: 9) presents four models, or visions, of university organisation; university as a self-governing community of scholars, an instrument for national political agendas, a representative democracy and a service enterprise embedded in competitive markets. These models are based on a combination of two dimensions of higher education governance; autonomy and conflict. The latter dimension is dependant on whether actors have shared or conflicting norms and objectives and the first is dependant on whether the institutions are governed by internal or external factors. This is another way of stating how centralised or decentralised state authority is. This dimension may to a considerable extent tell something about which actors may have influence on higher education. According to Marton (2000: 26) decentralisation from state authority may imply that the higher education institutions do not become more autonomous. They may in fact become more dependent upon local authorities or the local business communities.

Since the four models are 'visions', or ideal typologies, one will in policy and practice at all times find combinations of them. Which one of them is dominant, will therefore change over time. Olsen (2005: 16-17) points out that "the task is to understand how different system balance different concerns and how they develop power-sharing arrangements rather than all power to faculty [...]". My focus is on the stakeholders' influence and potential variation in this.

The first typology, "self-governing community of scholars", is a university governed by internal factors in which the actors have shared norms and objectives. The model has close ties to the Humboldtian ideal with its emphasis on university autonomy and academic freedom. The university is viewed as an autonomous cultural institution, a collegium of chair-holders that guarantee quality through outstanding research and education (Bleiklie et al. 1996).

Leaders are elected by and among the academic staff. The role of the state is to protect the university from outside and guarantee its autonomy (Olsen 2005).

Although by being the major source for funding, the state can maintain some control (Marton 2000).

The second model, “instrument for national political agendas”, combines government by external factors and actors with shared norms and objectives. The university is a tool for implementing public policy. This is similar with what Bleiklie (1996) describes as a public agency in which research and education are regarded as means to economic development and welfare. Utility is a key factor with respect to prioritising research and educational issues and how science can contribute to national goals. Leaders are appointed (Olsen 2005).

Autonomy is limited by, among other things, the fact that funding depends on the institutions’ ability to be effective and efficient with regard to achieving political goals. State authority is also exercised through legislation (Marton 2000).

The third model, “representative democracy”, describes an institution governed by internal factors in which the actors have conflicting norms and objectives. Not only academics, but also both administrative personal and students are represented in the university governing boards and councils. In order to defend their interests the members of the organisation are “[...] bargaining, voting and coalition-building [...]” (Olsen 2005: 11). These changes are seen as part of the more general workplace democratisation in the 1960s and 1970s. And as a result of mass education the universities were crowded and access to professors was limited and there was a pressure for change (Olsen 2005).

This model, like the first one, has some of the characteristics of a cultural institution, but also more of the disciplinary university than of the Humboldtian. This is because the diverse disciplines make up relative egalitarian communities and not that dominated by senior professors. Authority is primarily rooted in the disciplinary community (Bleiklie et al. 1996). The role of the state is to protect and secure institutional autonomy and academic freedom.

The fourth typology, “service enterprise embedded in competitive markets”, is a combination of external factors and actors with conflicting norms and objectives. Here the dominant ideology is a belief in the market and neo-liberal economic theory. The university is supposed to open up towards the society; meet demands from the market, clients and customers. Research and education are considered to be goods and services and can be traded as such. The institution is to be protected from the

state authority. Academic leaders are appointed, not elected. Governing boards ought to have external representation (Olsen 2005).

This model has some common features with Bleiklie's (1996) description of the university as a corporate enterprise. The emphasis on quality is important, so is the expectation of efficiency. There is a belief that efficiency can be obtained by means of performance indicators. There is need for approval from the outside and the institution is dependent on markets, clients, donors, competitors, etc. Here Olsen (2005: 12) uses stakeholders for the first time in the sense that the university is dependent of these actors mentioned above.

## **2.2. Stakeholder theory**

Many regard R. Edward Freeman as the instigator of modern stakeholder theory (Andriof et al. 2002, Marstein 2003 a.o.) He defines stakeholders as "groups and individuals who can affect or are affected by the organisation's purpose" (Andriof et al. 2002). Stakeholder theory is an important approach when it comes to business ethics in general and company ethics more specifically. The point being that the leaders should not only take shareholders into account but also others, stakeholders, affected by their decisions.

Freeman's (Andriof et al. 2002) point is that companies meet two types of critique. One is that companies are only driven by the quest for profits, which undermines community and solidarity. The other is that companies do not contribute as large a portion of profits as they might have if the shareholders' interests and values had been the prime focus. Freeman claims that management theory and practices are in need of an approach in which not only shareholders' "win" but also in which stakeholders' are able to satisfy their interests. As shown above - just like industry and business - higher education institutions meet new and apparently diverging demands, among others, to open up and interact with other actors than the state and the students. Not only the nation state as owner of the institutions, but local authorities, local industry and business, students, employees and so on demand to have their interests heard in some way or another. In addition, public sector agencies are adapting these conceptions and ways of thinking from private sector. The way that private enterprises organise their activities is also considered the ideal for the public sector.

Donaldson and Preston go even further when it comes to defining the stakeholders' role by claiming that all those who have legitimate interests ought to take part in companies' decision-making bodies to gain benefits (Gould 2004). In this dissertation, the decisive point is to decide what legitimate interests are, and if and how the participation should be organised.

In Scandinavian stakeholder theory from the 1960s and 1970s workplace democracy and management were central elements. In an early version of stakeholder theory from Stymne and Rheman, the stake itself was not the most important thing. Their focus was rather on what contributions the stakeholder could make and what reward they should get (Näsi 1995). Accordingly, interactions and transactions became more important than the interest, or stake, itself. There are different kinds of transactions; goods, services, information, status, power, etc.

For studying stakeholding in higher education Amaral and Magalhães take Freeman's definition of stakeholder as their starting point, and define stakeholder broadly as "a person or entity with legitimate interests in higher education and which, as such, acquires the right to intervene" (Amaral & Magalhães, 2002: 2). Legitimacy, as in Gould's reference and discussion of Donaldson and Preston, is underlined as well.

When it comes to identifying and categorising stakeholders, one common distinction is between internal and external stakeholders (Neave 2002, Amaral & Magalhaes 2002, Burrows 1999 a.o.). According to Burrows (1999) the distinction is not always that easily applied because the same stakeholder or group of stakeholders can be both external and internal dependent on the issue in question. Her example is students who may be considered external stakeholders with regard to their retention and internal stakeholders as part of the knowledge community. An additional two dimensions are taken up by both Burrows (1999) and Neave (2002). The first one is whether cooperation with stakeholders represents an opportunity or a threat to the institution's ability to enact its goals and visions. The second dimension is whether the nature of the stake is moral or financial. A moral stake refers broadly to different non-economic forms of support. The financial stake refers to any economic dependence, from competitors, employees or the local community.

According to Freeman (cited in Burrows 1999) stakeholders have different foundations for their influence, respectively, formal, economic and political influence. Formal influence refers to a relationship based on contracts and regulations. A stakeholder that can provide or retain resources has economic influence. Political influence is being able to use of status and negotiations to affect an institution's decisions.

### **2.3 Stakeholder theory and governance**

In this section I will take a closer look at how the two theoretical approaches can be combined. Which stakeholders, external and internal, may be identified in each of the four governance models, what is the nature of their stake and may the cooperation be regarded as an opportunity or a threat?

If the universities are state owned, the state may act as a prime partner and can thus be regarded as a stakeholder. State authority implies both economic and political influence as they control resources and status and can make use of negotiations to affect the institutions' decisions. But the question is what happens when authority is decentralised and the institutions are supposed to open up.

Olsen (2005: 8) points out that according to the vision of the university as a self-governing community of scholars, its obligation is to the "society as a whole, not to specific "stakeholders" or those willing to pay, [...]".

But by applying stakeholder theory, and thereby analysing the actors' stake as well as the nature of the stake, etc, the picture may be more nuanced. Neave (2002) points out that in the Humboldtian model the contact between university and business and industry was directed through public administration. There was little or no room for individual interests to influence the universities, but the general interests were to be guided through the public administration. This makes the public administration a stakeholder, in addition to the state, both being external. If by stakeholder in the quotation above, Olsen (2005) is referring to the external actors, he may have a point that, what would be internal stakeholders according to Burrows, retain much of the influence on higher education. This is because the universities are governed by internal factors (self-governing). The main internal stakeholders would be the academic employees, given that this is an autonomous institution with

academic freedom and a collegium of chair-holders. Being elected among peers, the leaders are to be regarded as internal stakeholders as well.

Here the legitimating idea of higher education is to be found within the cultural and social functions of the university, as mentioned above. As this is a vision based on the chair-faculty with professorial dominance, based on academic quality, in which some may have more legitimate stakes than others due to their position in the organisation.

If the university is seen as an instrument for public policy, and thus governed by external factors, the immediate impression is that the internal stakeholders lose influence to the advantage of the external stakeholders. This is because the focus is on the utility of research and education with regard to economic growth and because the institutions' achievements are evaluated against national political goals continuously. Legitimacy will then be related to the extent these goals are attained.<sup>1</sup> Leaders appointed by the management may also be a way of substitution internal influence for external stakeholders, as compared to having leaders elected by the academic staff.

A university organised as a representative democracy ends the hegemony of the professors, if compared to the chair-faculty university. Given that academics, technical-administrative staff and students are represented in governing boards at different levels of the institution, there are several internal stakeholder groups with at least formal influence. Since the higher education institutions' autonomy is to be protected by the state, at first glance it may seem that the main external stakeholder is the state.

Like Stymne and Rheman above, Gould (2004: 222-223) also discusses the aspect of workplace democracy and extends it by asking whether stakeholder theory requires democratic management and participation in decision-making processes. If so, the question is who has the right to participate, to what extent and on what premises. And if someone's stake should take precedence over others, what should

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that policy formulation and change are more complex when the university is an instrument for public policy rather than regarding it as a unitary process (Bleiklie, Høstaker & Vabø 2000, Marton 2000). However, it is outside the scope of this dissertation to look into how, and by whom national policy is formulated.

be the reason for this? Using affectedness as a basis for participation in decision-making is difficult because it is hard to determine who is actually affected.

Donaldson and Preston (cited in Gould (2004) disapprove of the principles of participatory democracy, as well as workplace democracy. Instead they focus on the general demand that the management ought to consider the interests of different stakeholder groups in the decision-making process.

This brings the discussion to the vision of the university as a service enterprise. Here the stakeholders become more versatile due to the fact that the university is supposed to open up to the society and is no longer protected by the state.

Higher education institutions may cooperate with local administrations about, for example, tailor-made courses. The local administration can be interpreted as stakeholders, using the terminology introduced above. They have stakes in the university college as a course provider and may use their economic position to influence the content of these courses to meet their specific needs. Whether the cooperation is seen as a threat or an opportunity, may, among other things, depend upon whose point of view is taken. If the local administration, here the “buyer”, is not satisfied, it may always choose to go to another higher education institution, or consultancy company, assuming academic grades and merits are irrelevant.

Accordingly, other university colleges may be regarded as competitors, given that they provide comparable courses, and a potential threat. Both as a competitor and a partner, they are external stakeholders for the institution in question.

In line with the focus on evaluation and the use of performance indicators, accrediting institutions are established. This is an external stakeholder with formal influence.

Authorities outside the institution itself do the approval of study programs, though they are members of the scholarly community.

Within the market model, the legitimating idea of higher education is that of a knowledge producer (Gumpert 2000). As such, the higher education institutions must focus on efficiency, flexibility and consumer satisfaction. The preoccupation is with the potential problem that universities are not willing or able to adjust their activities. A university may thereby lose its position and eventually even its ability to survive as an institution.

As in the university as an instrument for public policy, leaders are appointed. If they come from the outside, the shift from internal to external stakeholders may be even more obvious.

The intention of this theoretical outline is to make it possible to discuss how the relationship and influence of the stakeholders may shift between the governance models. Influence, interest, legitimacy and accountability are all important, and classic subjects in political science.

It is both interesting and important to analyse policy in practice. Then what the structural changes in governance mechanisms can induce of change in different actors' influence on higher education is one way of doing it. Thereby it becomes important to study who the actors are and if and how they use their influence. We may thus get more knowledge of what actually happens and how this is in relation to national policy.

### **3. Methodological Issues**

This section is not very well developed, but consists of only loose ideas so far.

I have chosen a qualitative approach to this study. This is primarily motivated by the wish to generate rich data in detail, embedded in context. According to Maxwell (1996: 17) qualitative studies are suited for understanding the context of action and its influence on the participants' actions.

The study has two empirical tasks to fulfil. The first is to analyse national policy with regard to governance models and stakeholders. The second consists of an examination of the practice in university colleges. All institutions and actors are faced with similar macro-level changes. Thus, it is interesting to study how they respond to these changes.

#### **3.1. Case study research**

The proposed study has as the objective of contributing to knowledge about stakeholders and their influence. My research questions are mainly descriptive, who are the actors, what are their roles, stakes and influence. The questions are both related to previous and contemporary governance models and phenomena, i.e. the

1970s and the present. This should make the embedded multiple-case study the preferable research strategy (Yin 2003).

In order to make the study of change in stakeholders influence possible, I will use two different time frames in Norwegian higher education policy (1976-1989 and 1990-2004). 1976 might be a convenient starting point because of the start of mass education and the establishment of the system of regional colleges. Until then many of the courses of further education later merged into the university colleges, did not require secondary school education for admission. Therefore they were not counted as higher education. This period is also often characterised by ideologies of participation and political democracy (Olsen 2005).

The introduction of management by objectives and activity planning will be used as the dividing line around 1990. This implies an important shift in governance mechanisms because of more management-oriented solutions.

There was a far-reaching merger of university colleges in which, for example, teacher training was merged with nursing and health training and business colleges in 1994. Therefore I will not be able to follow precisely the same cases in both periods. The two periods might be 1976-1989 and 1990-2004.

The next question is how many units of analysis to select; i.e. higher education institutions, and how to select them (according to what principle). Given the merger, I probably need at least three university colleges during the end of the last period. If I make it more than three, the amount of information for the first period will probably be too large to handle. When looking into which institutions existed before 1994 in same region, I will most likely find a College of education, College of Nursing and Health Studies, College of Engineering, Business Colleges and Regional University College.

1976-1989:

- 3 Colleges of Education
- 3 Colleges of Nursing and Health Studies
- 3 Colleges of Engineering
- 3 Business Colleges and/or Regional University Colleges

1990-2004:

- The same institutions (twelve) in the same regions as before 1990
- From 1994/after the merger it will be 3 university colleges (including all the institutions studied in the first period)

### **3.2. Data collection**

To fulfil the empirical tasks, first there is a need to examine the national policy with regard to the governance models and stakeholder theory outlined above, within the two cases. This will be done by studying national policy documents.

Secondly I need to study archival records such as local strategic documents, board protocols, etc. to get information on how the university colleges have respond to national policy, and on who the actors actual are and what role they play.

For this last part, the practice, I need to collect interview data as well. This may be a way to get knowledge about interactions and transaction mentioned by Stymne and Rheman.

Rectors and directors seem a reasonable choice for interviewing. But I will probably also need information from the department/faculty level. This is because many of the former colleges, or independent institutions, are organised as individual departments/faculties under the university colleges. It might be difficult to get in touch with someone having information from the first period, at least in a leading position today.

### **3.3. Validity issues**

In order to deal with problems of establishing construct validity and reliability of the ca study evidence, Yin (2003) recommends following three principles for data collection. The principles are 1) multiple sources of evidence, 2) creating case study database and 3) maintaining a chain of evidence (Yin 2003: 97-105).

Here I will use data triangulation, i.e. documents and interviews, as multiple sources of evidence. This should make the findings and conclusions more credible and accurate in the data collection phase.

With this approach I will not be able to do statistical generalisations. This is further substantiated by the fact that I will not do any probability sampling of units of analysis. On the other hand, I assume the opportunities to generalise the findings are related to the theoretical realm. Yin (2003: 32-33) points out "previously developed theory is used as a template with which to compare the empirical results of the case

study". Thereby the aim is toward an analytic generalisation in this case study.

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