The new goal-orientation of research strategies

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Is educational research in the Nordic countries being swallowed up by transnational target setting and market thinking economic rationalities?

In many respects Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden share similar societal traits. Consequently we often see that they go through similar societal transformations (e.g. Andersen, Holmström, Honkapohja, Korkman, Söderström, & Vartiainen, 2007). This also appears to be the case as far as educational research politics and education governance as well as conditions for research is concerned. Obviously, a host of variations and differences exist among strategies applied within different Nordic countries, each responding to different historical backgrounds and challenges. Nonetheless, a recognizable strain of commonalities exist that makes it reasonable to speak about Nordic trends, as is visible from reading, among others, Skagen (2006), Klette, Carlgren, Rasmussen and Simola (2002) and Moos, Carney, Johansson and Mehlbye (2000) concerning teacher education, school leadership and schools. Concerning universities and conditions for research many smaller universities and colleges have lately merged into bigger units, giving the term university new meanings and confirming in many countries the current buzz-word «big is beautiful». 
In the wake of two to three decades of restructuring movements we have witnessed considerable shifts in public governance. Whether heralded by neo-liberal or «third way» spokesmen this era in reform of public governance has often been labelled New Public Management. Prior to this period public institutions in Nordic countries, and universities in particular, were typically governed according to, what was called the ‘principle of arm’s length’: The government raised the funding, made the aims and goals and left it pretty much to the institutions to manage the education and research. In the meantime the arm has grown considerably shorter, transforming the principle of «arm’s length» into a principle and a practice of «hands on».

At the same time as governments increase governance of universities in detail, in spite of pervasive discourse on organisational self-governance, a squeeze on public funding gains stronger foot-hold (Wright & Ørberg, 2006). Accountability regimes are on the rise with an impressive array of social technologies to make universities and academic workers more productive as well as more responsive to government priorities (Carney, 2006; Krejsler, 2006; Moos, 2006a).

In his article in this theme issue «Transnational technologies, national techniques and local mechanisms in Finnish university governance» Hannu Simola thus suggests how a process unfolds from more autonomous universities to increasing state demands that universities should be accountable for their use of public funds and of more immediate utility to society.

The impetus for these new research strategies has largely come from the USA, UK, Australia and New Zealand, and has been carried and sustained by proxy of trans-national agencies like the OECD, WTO (GATS), World Bank and the EU Commission, often with reference to the so-called knowledge economy discourse. It represents an increasing interest in universities, education and research from government and business. Research and education are conceived of in market terms and are under pressure to become competitive in the global research and education markets (e.g. Henry, Lingard, Rizvi & Taylor, 2001; Wright, 2005). On the one hand this represents globalisation. On the other hand it means standardization.

Some of the more dominant terms that have been coined in the wake of these transnational developments are Evidence based practice, Mode 2 research, «more quantitative and internationally comparable research», «more immediate utility of research to educational practice and to business». These terms appear to represent the crux of emerging demands that signify a new goal orientation of research strategies, which are gaining strong momentum even within Nordic educational research contexts. Research strategies and grants increasingly become dependent upon demands from outside the research community, where government strategic priorities and dependence upon external financing play major roles. These demands are often marshalled into standardized quality assurance indicators that build upon a vision of excellence and relevance that is closely connected to market thinking (Shore & Wright, 2000).

In her article in this theme issue «What counts? The skewing effects of research assessment systems» Susan Wright warns a Nordic audience to learn from the British experiences of venturing too long up the road of implementing accountability systems. From the British vantage point of being among the first to implement the target setting and market-oriented rationalities in research and education, she argues that that strategy may produce so many negative unintended effects that serious harm is done to
the entire balance of research, education, critique and supposed utility to society in a so-called knowledge society. She pinpoints the dangerous logics put at stake by guiding us through the illuminating example and troubled waters of the so-called RAE-system (Research Assessment Exercise).

Staffan Larsson describes in «An emerging economy of publications and citations» how Nordic academics are increasingly having their publications valued through the global system of ranking by means of indexes and citations. This predominantly Anglo-American system is being used to produce easily comparable figures of the quantity and quality of research publications and thus also being used as a very important foundation for remunerating researchers. Staffan Larsson points to a number of problems in this New Public Management of universities. One is that it is built on Anglo-American standards of ‘hard science’ and another is that English is the one and only language accepted.

From a French point of view Agnès van Zanten writes about changes in the perceptions of relations between research and policy making in the article «From critical intellectuals to «idea brokers»? Traditions and new developments on the links between research and policy-making in education in France». While researchers previously were seen as free and isolated academics that were occupied with exploring diverse aspects of life, nature and society, they are now being more closely included in the state’s policy making and economic management. This development can, writes Agnès van Zanten, become a threat to social and educational research in line with the trends described in the other articles in this special issue.

Closely related to those trends in management of educational systems described previously, Gita Steiner-Khamsi, from a Central European background and at present from a North American position, discusses reform strategies in education in the article «Knowledge-Based Regulation and the Politics of International Comparison». There seems to be global consensus on the need for knowledge-based regulation and evidence based policy planning. The consensus is growing based on international comparisons.

All of the articles in this issue point at the influences of transnational agencies like the EU Commission and the OECD. At a EU-level Nóvoa and Lawn (2002) argue that a European educational space is emerging, created by transnational governance, networks and cultural and economic projects. It could be argued that this was formally initiated at the Lisbon European Council meeting in 2000, where education and research were moved into the area of public services and the «open method of coordination» was presented (Lange & Alexiadou, 2007).

Undoubtedly, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD/OCDE) represents another, if not the most powerful, transnational agent that currently exerts enormous impact upon how education and research can be conceptualised and implemented in local national contexts (Henry et al., 2001). An example of how such transnational agency mingles into a Nordic context could be represented by the recent Danish experience of restructuring educational research and how it can be conceived. The Danish government thus asked the OECD/CERI (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation) to conduct a review on educational Research & Development in order to facilitate a change in the national agenda in relation to quality in educational research. It could be argued that the government simply asked the OECD for help to set the Danish agenda. In the OECD report on Denmark (2004) one can read: «The purpose of the OECD review of a national educational R&D system is to assess
the extent to which it serves its function of creating, distributing and applying the knowledge on which practitioners and policy makers draw.» (Moos, 2006b, p. 64)

The OECD-understanding behind the reviews appears to represent a linear concept of the relations between research and policy or practice, a concept that suggests that these fields are governed by the similar kinds of marked place logics. Consequently, universities are urged to produce more evidence to ensure that practitioners may acquire knowledge to arrive at the best practices, the evidence-based practice, and ensure that policy-makers may find legitimation for the right political decisions. The Danish Minister of Science, Technology and Innovation – and his governmental officers – frontrunners in this tendency, got that message. And in public he has been identified with the motto that ‘the process from idea to invoice must be reduced’.

Many educational as well as other researchers experience this new state of affairs to be at odds with the nature of research and science. Some argue that research and science are increasingly expected to produce ready-made solutions to practical problems, thereby turning researchers into social engineers, who know the answers and care less about the questions. Others would argue that the concept of critique is not ‘in’ in contemporary educational research policy, which may endanger the very foundations of science as well as of societies in the long term.

Are we in a situation where university and research as we know them are at stake… or – even worse – in rapid decline? Or are we better served by looking at the purpose of university as well as research as entities that have always been subject to change according to change in societal conditions? The latter suggest that a new strategic space has appeared that requires new strategies to be mastered appropriately (Deleuze, 1995).

In this theme issue, we asked leading Nordic and global scholars within the field of educational research to elaborate on where educational research is going; with particular consideration to what that means in a Nordic context. First we asked them to give keynote speeches at the Nordic Educational Research (NERA) Congress in Copenhagen in March, 2008, and then we asked them to develop their speeches into the articles in this special issue.

**Literature**


Lange, B. & Alexiadou, N. (2007). New forms of European governance in the ed-


