

Susan Wright · Stephen Carney  
John Benedicto Krejsler  
Gritt Bykærholm Nielsen  
Jakob Williams Ørberg

# Enacting the University: Danish University Reform in an Ethnographic Perspective

# Higher Education Dynamics

Volume 53

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Enacting the University:  
Danish University  
Reform in an Ethnographic  
Perspective

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Susan Wright   
Danish School of Education  
Aarhus University  
Copenhagen, Denmark

John Benedicto Krejsler   
Danish School of Education  
Aarhus University  
Copenhagen, Denmark

Jakob Williams Ørberg   
Danish School of Education  
Aarhus University  
Copenhagen, Denmark

Stephen Carney   
Roskilde University  
Roskilde, Denmark

Gritt Bykærholm Nielsen   
Danish School of Education  
Aarhus University  
Copenhagen, Denmark

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This book is the only publication that brings together the work and ideas of the five authors. Each of the authors has of course been active in publishing their work during the course of the project. Nielsen conducted her research as a PhD project, and her thesis has been revised and published as *Figuration Work: Student Participation, Democracy and University Reform in a Global Knowledge Economy* (Berghahn, 2015). The discussion of 'figures' and 'figuration' and some of the material in Chapters 10 and 11 synthesise an argument developed at greater length in the introduction and Chapters 3 and 6 of that book. A briefer version of the argument developed in Chapter 2 is published in Wright and Ørberg's 'Universities in the Competition State: Lessons from Denmark' in Cris Shore and Susan Wright's (editors) *Death of the Public University? Uncertain Futures for Higher Education in the Knowledge Economy* (Berghahn). In Chapter 3, Wright and Ørberg draw on a more detailed analysis published in 2011 as 'The Double Shuffle of University Reform: The OECD/Denmark Policy Interface' in pages 269–293 of Atle Nyhagen and Tor Halvorsen's (editors) *Academic Identities – Academic Challenges? American and European Experience of the Transformation of Higher Education and Research* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholar Press). Finally, our thanks go to Yoka Janssen and colleagues at Springer for their patience and persistence in waiting for this book to reach fruition.

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## About the Authors

**Stephen Carney** is Associate Professor in Comparative Education at Roskilde University. He has undertaken studies of schooling in England and across the Nordic countries and explored university leadership in Denmark and school reform in India, Nepal and Tibet. He has been active in the US Comparative and International Education Society (CIES), chairing the thematic groups ‘Globalization and Education’ and ‘Post-foundational Theory and Method’, and is currently President of the Comparative Education Society in Europe (CESE). He coedited the journal *Comparative Education Research* between 2014 and 2019.

**John Benedicto Krejsler** MEd, PhD, is Professor with Special Responsibilities at the Danish School of Education, Aarhus University, Denmark. His research interests include university reform and education policy in a transnational perspective, evidence and new conditions for producing ‘truths’ about ‘what works’ and social technologies (e.g. comparative surveys and rankings, appraisal interviews). Theoretically, his work draws on the traditions of Foucault, Deleuze and Habermas among others. He is President of the Nordic Educational Research Association (Board Member since 2006) and was a Council Member of the European Educational Research Association (2009–2018). He was a Visiting Scholar at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) in 2015 and a Visiting Professor at Kristianstad University (Sweden) in 2009 and 2010.

**Gritt Bykærholm Nielsen** PhD, is Associate Professor in Anthropology of Education and Globalisation at Aarhus University. Her research concerns shifting notions of democracy and how the conditions for political/pedagogical participation are changing as the (welfare) state and its educational institutions are reformed. She is interested in how alternative understandings and responses to dominant knowledge regimes are developed, circulated and promoted in more activist, experimental groups, especially among students. On these and related issues, she has done ethnographic field work in Denmark and New Zealand. Theoretically, she combines economic anthropology and anthropology of policy with feminist and

post-structuralist-inspired thinking. Her latest book is *Figuration Work: Student Participation, Democracy and University Reform in a Global Knowledge Economy* (New York: Berghahn 2015).

**Jakob Williams Ørberg** has worked in research and policy-making in Danish higher education since 2006. He was a Postdoc, Centre Manager and Co-founder at the Centre for Higher Education Futures, Danish School of Education, Aarhus University, until February 2019. His main research interests are policy-making in higher education and Indian engineering education. His PhD was on contested conceptions of the future in Indian policy-making and in the life of Indian elite engineering students. His postdoc projects explored the widening role of private supplementary education (shadow education) in Indian higher education and the introduction of research integrity policies into Danish universities. Before his PhD, he was a researcher on two projects on Danish university reform. He further worked in policy-making in the Danish Ministry of Higher Education and Science. He is currently counsellor for Innovation, Research and Higher Education at the Royal Danish Embassy in India.

**Susan Wright** DPhil (Social Anthropology, University of Oxford), is Professor of Educational Anthropology at the Danish School of Education (DPU), Aarhus University, and Director of the Centre for Higher Education Futures (CHEF). She studies people's participation in large-scale processes of transformation and works with concepts of audit culture, governance, contestation and the anthropology of policy. She has researched university reforms in the UK and Denmark and coordinated the EU-funded ITN project on Universities in the Knowledge Economy (UNIKE) in Europe and the Asia-Pacific Rim. She is Founding Coeditor of the journal *LATISS* (*Learning and Teaching: International Journal of Higher Education in the Social Sciences*). Her recent publications include *Death of the Public University? Uncertain Futures for Higher Education in the Knowledge Economy* (with Cris Shore, 2017, Berghahn) and *Recreating Universities for the Public Good* (with Davydd Greenwood, 2017, special issue of *LATISS* 10.1).

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**Part I**  
**Introduction and Approach**

# Chapter 1

## Introduction: An Ethnography of University Reform



Susan Wright 

### 1.1 University Reform

Over the last two decades, there have been momentous efforts to reform universities worldwide. International organisations, national governments and university managements have all engaged in these reforms and promoted them with an aura of inevitability. Agencies such as the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development), the European Union and the World Bank projected a future ‘global knowledge economy’ and enjoined governments, if they wanted their country to be successful, to make their universities the drivers of this economy. They proposed that university research should be directed towards the needs of ‘knowledge industries’ with faster ways to turn ideas into innovative products and to bring returns to the national economy. Equally, they proposed university education programmes should be continually adjusted to attract international, fee-paying students and to produce graduates with the competences needed in this high-skills economy. To be effective and efficient in fulfilling these purportedly crucial roles for the future prosperity of their country, universities should be more business-like, strategically-led and market-orientated. In short, the reforms have aimed to change substantially the purpose and organisation of the university.

This book explores how these reforms have managed to transform a system of institutions that are reputedly change-resistant and that present themselves as proud bastions of independent research and teaching. Given that universities have been described as consisting of units in ‘loosely coupled systems’ rather than centrally steered organisations (Weick 1976), and given that managing academics is popularly likened to herding cats (Deem 2010), how have universities been transformed so profoundly and so quickly? The role and location of universities within the state

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S. Wright (✉)

Danish School of Education, Aarhus University, Copenhagen, Denmark  
e-mail: [suwr@edu.au.dk](mailto:suwr@edu.au.dk)

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has been a recurrently debated issue, but this version of the university as driver of a nation's competitiveness in the global knowledge economy emerged quite suddenly in the 1990s. How did a comparatively small network of people, who did not speak for a pre-existing social mobilisation, create this narrative vision of universities acting in a new world? How is the university constructed as an acting (and coherent) subject in this narrative? What instruments and forms of power have policy makers used to spread this vision across countries with vastly different university systems and to bring it into effect? How have students, academics and managers engaged with policy makers' ideas of the future, exposed dilemmas as they experienced the changes, and used opportunities to promote and act upon their own visions of the university?<sup>1</sup>

## 1.2 Denmark as an Optic

Why Denmark, when university reforms have been so widespread around the world? In Denmark, a previous University Law in 1993 was meant to be the reform to end all reforms and was followed by a long period of relative calm, whilst reforms were gathering pace in other countries. Once the Danish government decided to bring about change, it became very active in the international organisations and forums that were developing reform agendas, and Denmark became known for adopting these ideas in their most thoroughgoing forms. This meant that extensive changes were concentrated into a very short time-span. It was also possible for the new University Law of 2003 to apply a new logic consistently to the whole sector, as there were relatively few universities and they were all brought under the same legal and financial framework. As a result of the speed, extensiveness and extreme versions of sector-wide reforms in Denmark, this is an excellent optic through which to

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<sup>1</sup>The project on which this book is based was entitled 'New Management, New Identities? Danish University Reform in an International Perspective'. The researchers were Professor Susan Wright, Professor with Special Responsibilities John B. Krejsler and (then PhD Student, now Associate Professor) Gritt B. Nielsen from the Danish University of Education (later merged with Århus University) and Associate Professor Stephen Carney of Roskilde University. A number of research assistants were also employed: Peter Brink Andersen and Camilla Gregersen worked on specific issues for short periods; Nathalia Bricchet (2009) studied the ways universities prepared for the new law and did participant observation at meetings of the new governing boards; and Jakob Williams Ørberg worked with Susan Wright for over 2 years on historical and contemporary debates about public sector reform and on university reform in Denmark and in international agencies and co-authored their analysis in subsequent years. The project was funded by the Danish Research Council for Society and Economy, for 3.2 million kroner between 2004 and 2008, project number 09-058690. A visiting fellowship at CRASSH (Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities) at Cambridge University in spring 2010, and secondments to Auckland University through the EU Marie Curie project 'University Reform, Globalisation and Europeanisation' in autumn 2012 and spring 2013 gave Wright the opportunity to write her chapters for this book. She is grateful for new intellectual stimulation and very helpful feedback from many colleagues and especially Marilyn Strathern, Anna Tsing and Cris Shore.

view the multiple effects of high potency doses of the international cocktail of university reforms.

Contemporary waves of university reforms started in the 1980s in the UK, New Zealand and Australia where universities had been established historically as independent public corporations.<sup>2</sup> They adopted new forms of managerialism, cost cutting and market competition purportedly copied from industrial corporations. In the 1990s, a shift from treating education as a public good to a private investment opened the way, notably in the U.S., Australia and the UK, for funding public universities through student fees and loans. Further waves of reform started in Europe where universities were historically state institutions and where they have largely sustained free or very low fees for public education. The Bologna Process started to 'harmonise' education cycles, qualifications and quality assurance, with the aim of making Europe one of the most attractive and competitive regions for higher education in the world – even though the 48 countries currently engaged in this process stretch well beyond Europe and in to Asia. The Bologna Process had wider implications for reforms of university autonomy, governance and management, seen for example in Sweden's decentralisation reform in 1993, Norway's quality reform in 2002, Austria's University Act in 2002, and last but not least Denmark's University Law of 2003. Countries that are far afield have tried to borrow what they imagine to be European reforms. For example, British ideas of arms-length governing of autonomous universities were transposed to Japan with quite different effects (Goldfinch 2006). Versions of the UK-Australasian and UK-European reforms have reached the very differently organised university sector in the U.S.; at the same time, dislocated and bowdlerised images of the top tier of U.S. universities (notably Harvard, Stanford, MIT) have been held up as models for complete higher education sectors in Europe. Not even emerging or poor economies have been immune. For example, since 1994 South Africa has participated in widespread reforms of the education, organisation and autonomy of universities (Oxlund 2010). On the basis of recommendations from a high profile National Knowledge Commission, India has massively expanded its centrally funded higher education system through the establishment of new Central Universities, Indian Institutes of Technology and Indian Institutes of Management (Government of India 2009:18). In 2010, China published a ten-year plan, the National Outline for Medium and Long Term Educational Reform and Development, and launched projects to improve the quality of universities, while Project 211 in 1995, Project 985 in 1998, and the Double First Class University Plan in 2015 aimed to develop elite institutions and propel them up the international rankings (Guo-hua Wang 2010; Peters and Besley 2018).

From our location in Denmark, we critiqued the way policies seem to travel globally, with apparently similar reforms taking place in widely divergent countries. A central difficulty in the vast literature on policy travel, borrowing, lending and learning is the tendency to treat policy as itself an actor. Rizvi addresses this issue when he argues that, undeniably, there is a global convergence of educational

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<sup>2</sup> See for example, Wright 2004; Shore 2007; Marginson and Considine 2000.

restructuring, but this is not the work of a ‘universalistic logic’ or reified ‘global forces’ but of human actors who, through discursive and material practices, create regularised patterns and institutional systems that both enable and constrain them (Rizvi 2004: 28). He proposes that

particular forms and impact [of globalisation] need to be understood historically through a perspective that connects the macro-economic global processes to the actual networks of social action that people create, move in, and act upon in their daily lives. Globalization thus needs to be located within specific sites (Rizvi 2004: 29).

Rizvi’s useful theorising of the global convergence of educational restructuring leaves us with the challenge of working out how to do such research ethnographically. This book uses Denmark as a site to take up that challenge. Three specific macro-political features were soon identified as important in this ethnography, and these features contribute new dimensions to the literature on university reform and policy travel. First, Danish politicians and civil servants were deeply involved in the international networks and agencies (notably the OECD, Bologna Process and EU) that were envisaging reformed universities as the driving force behind a future ‘global knowledge economy’. Some politicians, policy makers, university leaders and academics who were engaged in political debates over university reform invested both in networking and playing an active role in an international ‘epistemic community’ and in presenting themselves as national actors, appealing to, or summoning international agencies across the national boundary. This means that ‘Denmark’ does not act as a natural boundary for the study; rather, building on Robertson and Dale’s (2008) critique of ‘methodological nationalism’, this ethnographic study shows how such political activists were making policy travel through a strategic politics of choosing when to transcend and when to reinforce the national boundary.

This book argues that a second, important macro-political feature was that the Danish university reforms did not just concern the creation of a global knowledge economy; they were also part of a major reformation of the state and its steering mechanisms. Those Danish policy makers who were networked into international agencies, and especially the OECD, were an important source for the imaginary and the policy prescriptions that informed not just the reform of universities but of the whole of the public sector. Literature on public sector reform debates the shift from ‘rowing’ a bureaucratic state to ‘steering’ outsourced service provision, and questions whether this involves a ‘hollowing out’ or reconstitution of the power of the state (Osborne and Gaebler 1993; Rhodes 1994; Weller et al. 1997). Many of the aspects of Danish university reform had little to do with universities *per se* and had much more to do with the new methods of steering that were being applied to most state-funded and public institutions in Denmark. Yet the literature on public sector reform has not included universities as a site for studying how these widespread changes have been re-shaping the state and, simultaneously, one of its core institutions. On the other hand, although the higher education literature focuses on managerialism and the corporatisation of universities, it rarely locates these processes in wider reforms of the public sector and the nature of the state, which were very

prominent features of the Danish case. This ethnography called for analysing the conjunction between university reform and public sector reform.

A third important macro-political feature was the changing style of state politics within which the reforms were located. Denmark's tradition of coalition and consensus was markedly different from, for example, England's adversarial politics, with its focus on contest and dominance. But this research took place at a time when Danish politics were themselves becoming more adversarial: the 2001 coalition government between the Liberals and Conservatives, with the support of the populist and nationalistic Danish Folk Party made changes that sent shockwaves through the newspapers and universities. In his first 'New Year's Speech', the Prime Minister, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, denigrated academically trained staff working in NGOs and pressure groups on issues of ethnicity and immigration as 'arbiters of taste' (*smagsdommere*). These staff were used to researching issues and taking the results to the appropriate ministries, where they expected them to be discussed and taken seriously; now the government summarily withdrew funding, which closed or merged 150 of these organisations. Soon traditions of consultation and consensus between the political parties were also broken. During the whole of the 2001–2011 Liberal-Conservative coalition, the only issue on which there was agreement between the government and the Social Democrat opposition was university reform. These parties joined in passing the 2003 University Act and such political consensus left little space for dissenting voices. If they had not realised before, it came home to many people in the university sector that Danish politics had shifted away from dialogue and consensus when, in 2006, the Minister 'invited' universities to merge with each other and with government research institutions. At least two universities (Aarhus School of Business and the Danish University of Education) sought to exercise their new autonomy as 'self-owning institutions' and declined the Minister's invitation to merge. They were warned that in that case, they would lose in the distribution of significant new state funding for research.<sup>3</sup> These institutions decided they *had* to merge voluntarily. Examples are legion, where board members and academics expected to be able to express a view to the Minister and have it taken seriously in discussion, expecting a consensual politics. They were unsure how to operate when the government refused and adopted adversarial tactics. The fact that the reforms were introduced at this moment of a change in the way of doing national politics has a strong bearing on the ethnographic account.

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<sup>3</sup> Børge Obel, then rector of Aarhus School of Business, email 21 July 2016.



Fig. 1.1 Death notice for ‘The Free University (1479–2003)’. (Source: Øllgaard 2003)

### 1.3 Danish University Reforms

The University Act passed by the Danish Parliament in May 2003 (Danish Parliament 2003) was widely taken to herald a thoroughgoing change in Danish universities, to the extent that the academic unions’ magazine published a death notice on its front page (Fig. 1.1).

The main provisions of the 2003 University Law (Danish Parliament 2003) are presented in brief outline below. Bearing in mind Strathern’s (2006) critique that bullet points pile up issues without exploring linkages between them, we have purposefully chosen this format, rather than narrative, to imitate what is being described: the provisions are presented as disparate issues without, at this stage, presuming they make up a coherent package.

- The **purpose** of universities: previous laws had stated the purpose of universities to be research, education and dissemination of knowledge (*formidling*). Now, in addition, universities were enjoined to collaborate with the ‘surrounding society’ and exchange knowledge with a wide circle of stakeholders.<sup>4</sup> Education, still

<sup>4</sup>The University Law states ‘The University shall collaborate with the surrounding society and... contribute to promoting growth, welfare and development in the society’ (‘Universitet skal samarbejde med det omgivende samfund og ...bidrage til at fremme vækst, velfærd og udvikling i samfundet’). The Memorandum to the University Law 2003 § 2 Stk. 3 states ‘The University, as an integral part of its work, exchanges knowledge and competences on a mutual basis with a big circle of actors, organisations, authorities, public and private enterprises and so on’ (‘Universitetet udveksler som en integreret del af dets virke viden og kompetencer på gensidig basis med en stor kreds af aktører, organisationer, myndigheder, offentlige og private virksomheder m.v.’) (Danish Parliament 2003: §2 Stk 3).



under considerable Ministerial control, was also reformed to fit the degree structure of the Bologna Process,<sup>5</sup> with quality evaluations and ‘competence profiles’ directed to specific jobs in the labour market.

- The **status** of universities: universities became ‘self-owning’ (*selvejende*) institutions, which meant they could be declared bankrupt and it gave them the status of a person in law. As a legal person, they could enter into contracts and they were expected to use this tool to engage with stakeholders in the ‘surrounding society’. Indeed, the law required them to enter a periodic ‘development contract’ with the government. This status also meant that universities were required to protect their own research freedom and ethics, and no longer look to the government to shelter their independence.
- **University governance and strategic leadership:** The structure of the university, faculties and departments remained unchanged. However, the elected decision-making organs at each level of the structure – the Senate (*Konsistorium*), Faculty Board and Department Board – were abolished. Only the elected Study Boards remained. A Governing Board became the ultimate decision making body, responsible for the university’s strategy and for ensuring that its priorities were reflected in the rector’s budget. The majority of the governing board’s members and its chair were appointed from organisations outside the university world. Whereas leaders (Rector, Dean of Faculty, and Head of Department) had previously been elected by the academics, students and support staff, now the Governing Board appointed the Rector, who in turn appointed the Deans of Faculty, who appointed the Heads of Department. Each leader was only accountable to the leader above and no longer responsible to those they managed.
- **Contracts:** The Governing Board must enter into a ‘development contract’ with the Ministry, signed personally by the Chair and the Minister, setting out the ways the university will meet the government’s aims for the sector. Most universities have created a further chain of contracts between the Rector and each Dean of Faculty, and between the Dean of Faculty and each Head of Department. These contracts turn the Minister’s aims for the sector into targets and performance criteria that are devolved down through the university structure and that tie the leaders into a chain of upward accountability.
- **Financial management:** Government funding was to be gradually changed from a lump sum to output payments. The universities must adopt the capital accounting systems of the business world, and be audited by commercial auditing firms on their efficient use of funding, and by the State’s Auditor General on whether they were meeting the obligations in their Development Contracts.
- **Inspection:** The state auditors checked the universities’ performance against the commitments and targets in their Development Contracts each year. The Ministry retained powers to scrutinise universities if it received complaints and to check

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<sup>5</sup>The degree cycle is 3 year BA worth 180 ECTS points, 2 year MA (candidatus) worth 120 ECTS points, 3 year PhD worth 180 ECTS points.

they were obeying regulations and using resources appropriately to carry out their purposes and further the politicians' objectives (Ministry for Science, Technology and Development 2008).

Observers had different views on the ways these extensive changes would affect universities. The then-director of the Danish Evaluation Institute, EVA, went as far as to say he did not expect the 2003 law to have any great impact; it was designed to address a problem that had already been solved by improvements in the leadership of universities in recent years and universities were already moving in the 'right direction'. When the interviewer doubted that the effects of the law would be so benign, the director of EVA offered to meet in a year to see whether there had been changes and who should buy the drinks. A visitor from the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) thought the reforms would enable universities to become a 'power force' in society, able to create developments beyond those imagined by the Ministry. This was in direct contrast to a senior civil servant we interviewed in the Ministry who conceived of the reforms as turning universities into efficient organisations that would deliver goals on topics defined by government.

With such major and thoroughgoing changes, there was a general expectation that the passage of the law would be followed by a period of calm, for everyone to adjust and find out how to operate this new system. This view was widely held by university leaders that we interviewed at the time. But the reforms continued with unrelenting pace. The year 2004 saw two OECD reviews, commissioned by the government, on Danish higher education and Danish educational research and development, which proposed further changes to universities, including mergers with government research institutes (OECD 2004a, b). In the same year, there was a report on university governing boards (Committee on University Boards in Denmark 2003). The government, which had promoted the Bologna Follow-up Group's work on 'Qualifications Frameworks', also required universities revise all their education programmes to include 'competences' and 'qualifications keys' (*kvalifikationsnøgler*) and re-register them with the Ministry (Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation and BFUG 2005). In 2005–2006, the Prime Minister's Globalisation Council gave higher education and university research central responsibility for driving Denmark's capacity to compete in the global knowledge economy so as to retain its position as 'one of the richest countries in the world' (Danish Government 2006a). In 2006, with the aim of linking Danish universities and businesses into international knowledge environments, the Danish Ministries of Science, Technology and Innovation and of Foreign Affairs set up innovation centres in Silicon Valley (USA), Shanghai (China) and Munich (Germany), later expanded to include New Delhi, São Paulo, Seoul, Boston and Tel Aviv. Strategies for knowledge-based collaboration were agreed, for example, with China (Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation 2008a) and Science and Technology Attachés were posted at each centre to link the Danish and the host country's higher education, research and innovation environments, attract investment and bring the best international students and faculty to Denmark (Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation 2008b).

Meanwhile, reforms to the steering and management of universities continued. In 2006, four smaller, specialist universities and eight government research institutes merged with the multi-disciplinary universities (Danish Government 2006b). In 2007, a further law established an agency, at arms-length from the Ministry, to accredit all new or revised degree programmes, with a focus on their quality and relevance to the employment market (Danish Government 2007). In the same year a Ministry draft report (later largely shelved) proposed a very comprehensive and intrusive annual cycle of university inspections (Danish University and Property Agency 2007). From 2007 to 2009 there was a major exercise, and heated public debate, over the method for counting and grading research outputs, as a basis for competitive allocation of university funding (involving 360 academics in 68 disciplinary committees ranking all the journals in their field) (Emmeche 2009; Wright 2014). In 2008, the Ministry commissioned three reports on university equity and liquidity, the steering of self-owning institutions and the financing and organising of universities and government research institutes (Finance Ministry 2009; McKinsey 2009; PricewaterhouseCoopers 2009). In that same year, the government commissioned a major, international evaluation of the 2003 University Law (Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation 2009). This criticised, *inter alia*, the new leadership for not involving colleagues in making important decisions. A law reform in 2011 obliged the university board ‘to ensure the codetermination (*medbestemmelse*) and involvement (*medinddragelse*) of staff (*medarbejdere*) and students in material (*væsentlige*) decisions’ (Danish Government 2011: §10(6)). The very language conveys the uncertainty of a moment of transition: are *medarbejdere* (initially meaning colleagues, but increasingly meaning employees) to be full participants in decision-making structures or do leaders just have to include them occasionally on an ad hoc basis? A report in 2014 showed the majority of staff and students felt neither happened in practice (EPINION 2014).

‘Reform’ was therefore not just one law, but a continuous stream of changes emanating from the Ministry. Each document contained ways of imagining the future university, its managers, academics and students in a projected global knowledge economy and sought ways to entice or coerce people to act in terms of those images and make them come about. But policy makers and university leaders were not the only actors initiating change: university academics, students, stakeholders and the media were also actively engaged in imagining and enacting versions of the university. Whether and how these top-down efforts at ‘reform’ resulted in students, academics and managers acting in new ways and ‘transforming’ the university was a moot point to be explored ethnographically.

## 1.4 University Reform as a Process of Transformation

Our aim, to study how policy makers, managers, academics and students participated in shaping the university, posed a number of methodological problems. We were aware that some policy makers and managers still tended to expect that when

those in authority passed a law or published a directive its concepts would be translated into provisions and ‘trickle down’ through organisations to be implemented as changed practices ‘on the ground’ – a view called ‘authoritative instrumentalism’ (Shore and Wright 2011: 21). Some evaluation studies endorse this view, by using the goals of policy makers as a normative baseline against which to read off the changes made to organisations and the ‘reactions’ of employees and clients. Our aim was not to evaluate the university law; rather, by taking a ‘democratic concept of policy’ (ibid.) we treated the top-down actions of policy makers and managers as just one part of the ethnography and we gave equal importance to how students and academics navigated the various reforms, took their own initiatives and sought to create their university.<sup>6</sup>

Central to our analysis was the concept of enactment, as the university was being enacted in a double sense. First, the university was being reformed through the enactment or passing of laws to try and bring about ‘top-down’ changes; and second, managers, academics and students were enacting their institutions ‘bottom-up’ through their daily activities. The tension between the dual meanings of enacting a law and acting in everyday life was at the core of the study. However, that raised a number of other issues that informed the ethnography. What were the relations between imagining and enacting the university? The relation between speaking and doing is a long-standing question in anthropology (e.g. Beattie 1964) and there is an extensive literature in linguistics and philosophy on how certain speech acts are performative (Austin 1962), while Butler (1990) has demonstrated the integration of imagining and performing gender. We engaged with this literature and treated the relation between imagining and enacting as a zone of ethnographic exploration. How were the student, the academic, the manager and the university itself reimagined in policy texts? How did managers, academics and students negotiate the different ideas they encountered as discourses, expectations and demands? In processes of interaction and contestation, what imagined futures prevailed, and with what material effects? We saw universities as politically contested spaces, continually re-enacted by a range of actors, with no single vision emerging intact. Although students, academics, managers and policy makers did not have equal power to shape the institution, each was actively contributing to the re-imagining and enacting of the university.

This approach posed a problem about how to delineate the field in which the enactment and transformation of the university was taking place. As DiMaggio and Powell (1991: 65) explain, the structure of an organisational field cannot be determined *a priori*, but must be studied empirically. Whereas their ‘field’ is quite a static structure, our focus on a process of university reform meant that we had to be continually alert for new people and agencies entering the field or the role of others

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<sup>6</sup>This approach echoes a parallel move away from ‘technological determinism’ in science studies and towards accounts of how technology is ‘co-produced’ by multiple actors. Jasanoff (2004: 16), for example, showed how, as people explored the technologies of the internet, they not only changed its architecture but the sum of their interactions changed commerce and capital and transformed notions of national-belonging, ownership, privacy, security and governance.

diminishing. We plotted the actors and institutions that could possibly participate in the transformation of the idea and operation of Danish universities in the context of the emergence of a global knowledge economy and 'post-bureaucratic' governance. This included international agencies, notably the OECD, but also the Bologna Process, the European Union and UNESCO, and to a lesser extent, the World Economic Forum, the World Bank, the negotiations of GATS (General Agreement on Trade in Services) at the World Trade Organisation or later trade agreements between world regions. It encompassed a range of private sector companies that operate internationally and look to turn university research into innovative products, gain consulting or auditing contracts, or participate in the international trade in students. Nationally the field covered not only the Ministry of Research, Innovation and Technology, with primary responsibility for universities, and its arms-length agencies for accreditation and evaluation, but also the Ministry of Education and, importantly, the Ministry of Finance, which has driven the reform of the Danish public sector. The field also included the 'issue network'<sup>7</sup> that honey potted around Ministries and engaged actively in promoting or contesting policy narratives. In this network were Danish Industry and other organisations lobbying for the private business sector, professional associations, the Royal Danish Academy of Science and Letters, Danish Universities (the organisation of University Rectors and chairs of governing boards), academic and other trade unions and student organisations. Beyond this, the field included university managers, students and academics, and the professional, disciplinary and international networks to which they belonged.

As a policy field is obviously too enormous to study ethnographically in its entirety, a number of sites had to be carefully selected through which to study how particular actors contested and enacted emerging aspects of the university, and which would open windows onto an overall process of transformation (Wright 2011). Often the people and institutions involved in the policy field did not know each other or share a moral universe. The challenge then was to find a vantage point from which to follow the process of contestation and grasp the interactions and disjunctions between people in their different organisational environments and everyday lives. Gusterson (2005) suggested doing this by 'tilting the field' so as to study a system from the perspective of a particular site in great detail and identify the connections to and implications for the wider field. Reinhold (1998, Wright and Reinhold 2011) elaborated a methodology for tracking a process of contestation and transformation that she called 'studying through'. She traced the unfolding of conflicts and events *through* time and *through* space, as they moved back and forth between different locations and institutions in the policy field. This enabled her to show how, *through* a process of contestation, key organising concepts in society, with long historical trajectories, were transformed and their new meanings were

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<sup>7</sup>Rhodes and Marsh (1992: 187) define an 'issue network' as participants involved in policy consultation, rather than decision making, and who do not share the same understanding of an issue either with each other or with the bureaucracy. Their contacts and access fluctuate; they compete and conflict with each other, and are in unequal power relationships.

made authoritative in law texts and incorporated into institutional rules and procedures.

As an example of ‘tilting the field’ and ‘studying through’, soon after the appointment of the Danish universities’ new governing boards, one word and its associated practices encapsulated the debate about the nature of the emergent university. The law text committed universities to conduct their business in ‘greatest possible openness’,<sup>8</sup> but the newly formed governing boards excluded the university and wider public from their meetings by making many agenda points ‘closed’ and the brief minutes of the meetings gave away minimal information afterwards. This was in stark contrast to the open meetings of the now disbanded senates. By tilting the field to focus on the issue of ‘greatest possible openness’, this put a spotlight on all the actors and relationships concerned with shaping the future university: the minister who was keen to build up sympathetic relations with the boards; the boards and rectors keen to assert themselves as strategically in control of the organisation; the academic and student unions that sought to sustain their participation in decision making and maintain a sense of ownership over the university; and industrial interests that stated bluntly that an organisation with commercial interests had to be steered behind closed doors. By following the way this issue was contested in the media, by elected academic and student board members in different universities, and between unions and national associations and the ministry, we were able to trace how the meaning of ‘greatest possible openness’ was attenuated and eventually redefined by the minister as ‘where possible openness’. With this authoritative statement about the flipped meaning of ‘openness’, governing boards were able to make unquestionable their practices of closing most of their meetings to the university, and this became a firmly planted ‘a stake in the ground’ around which other aspects of the university revolved.

By taking a longitudinal approach and following what happened through time and across sites, we could see how policy makers, managers, academics and students contested, accepted, engaged with or ignored the reforms, used them to their own advantage, or initiated their own changes, based on other visions of the university. We traced moments of friction or processes of conflict as they unfolded through time, with moments of suspense, not knowing what will happen next, and surprise, when people responded to situations in ways unimagined and not predicted by more powerful others. Students, academics, managers and policy makers were all working within the constraints of the law and its steering technologies, but imagining and enacting them, their own roles, and the university in multiple ways. The analysis moves beyond description when a certain moment of contestation or friction results in particular way of imagining the university being translated into a practice that is dominant and unshakeable, at least for a while. Such practices act like ‘stakes in the ground’ around which the university is enacted, and as more stakes become implanted, so the university begins to be organised along new tracks and normative

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<sup>8</sup> *‘Der skal i størst muligt omfang være åbenhed om bestyrelsens arbejde’* (Danish Parliament 2003: Chapter 3, §10 stk 2).