ACADEMICS AND INSTITUTIONAL GOVERNANCE

1. INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we will reflect upon the involvement of the academic staff of universities and colleges in a number of European countries in the governance of their own organisations. Certain aspects of the nature of this involvement will be discussed as well as the appreciation of the academics of their own governance activities. In addition an estimate will be made of the costs of the academic involvement in institutional governance processes. The countries included are Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

In the framework of this chapter governance refers to the rules, structures and enforcement mechanisms concerning the academic and administrative decisions made in a university or college. It has to do with the preparation of the decisions, the actual decision-making process and the implementation of the decisions taken. We interpret governance structures as “the ways in which an organization divides its labour into distinct tasks and then achieves coordination among them” Mintzberg (1979, 2).

Why is the involvement of academics in institutional governance of relevance for understanding the academic profession? One answer to this question can be found in interpreting a university or college as a professional organisation. Scott (1995) refers to professional organisations as organisations in which professionals take part in the determination of goals and standards. Professionals have in general more power than other categories of employees. They can also be distinguished as regards the aspects of their work they try to control. For example, from unions in the sense that they not only want to control their working conditions but they even want to be able to define their own work.

Professionals seek cognitive control—insisting that they are uniquely qualified to determine what types of problems fall under their jurisdiction and how these problems are to be categorized and processed; they seek normative control, determining who has the right to exercise authority over what decisions and actors in what situations; and they seek regulative control, determining what actions are to be prohibited and permitted and what sanctions are to be used. (Scott, 1995, 3).

This control-seeking behaviour is also a characteristic of the academic profession, especially in universities. Academics not only want to be involved in the determination of their working conditions, e.g. salary, benefits, and facilities, but they also want to control the definition of their work and profession, inside their own organisation as well as in the wider regulatory, normative and cognitive context. As a consequence, analysing various aspects of the actual involvement of academics in the governance of their own organisations will give an insight into the nature of the control-seeking behaviour of academics and the effectiveness of it.
In this chapter we will mainly use data from the International Research Project on the Academic Profession, published by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in 1996, for reflecting upon the effects, effectiveness and (qualitative and quantitative) nature of the involvement of academics in institutional governance. In the Carnegie study, research directors from each participating country were involved in the design of the core of the joint questionnaire used. Even though research directors could omit questions from their own country’s survey instrument, the questionnaires used in the four European countries were to a large extent identical.2

2. GOVERNANCE ISSUES IN UNIVERSITIES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

2.1 Administration versus Governance

In the Carnegie study various items have been distinguished that are assumed to have an impact on the working conditions of academics as well as on the way they perceive their profession. One of these items is administration. Under the main heading of “administration” a number of issues have been addressed, of which the most important are:

1. The degree to which specific decisions are made centrally or decentrally in a higher education institution.
2. The opinion of academics on the governance of their institution.
3. The extent to which academics can influence specific decisions within their university or college.
4. The degree of control academics have over designing their own courses and determining their own research projects.

The first two of these “administration issues” are of an administrative nature, while the third and fourth are academic in nature. We prefer to use the term “governance” instead of “administration” when referring to the set of academic and administrative activities in which the academic staff of universities and colleges are involved.

In order to understand the importance of institutional governance for the functioning of academics in universities and colleges we will report the scores for the four included countries for each of the four “administration” issues included in the Carnegie survey. This reporting consists of the mean scores per issue for each of the four countries and a statistical analysis of the variation of the scores between the countries.3

Second, we will analyse the impact of the employment status on the scores. This refers to the difference between those academics with a tenured, full-time position and those who do not have such a position. We assume that tenured, full-time staff are in general more interested and involved in the governance processes at their institution leading to different opinions on these governance processes.