DENMARK'S TWO UNIVERSITY CENTERS: THE QUEST FOR STABILITY, AUTONOMY, AND DISTINCTIVENESS

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ABSTRACT

In the 1970's Denmark established two new institutions called "university centers" which were to differ from the traditional universities in terms of academic organization and curriculum. The first center, Roskilde, was established near the national capital while the second center, Aalborg, was established in a provincial area. The development of these two centers, though emanating from the same plan, has been strikingly different particularly in terms of institutional stability, autonomy and distinctiveness.

This article presents case studies of these two institutions from their opening in 1972 and 1974 respectively to the summer of 1979 and attempts to explain the different patterns of development.

During the decade of the 1970's Denmark embarked on a major experiment in its system of higher education by establishing two new institutions called "university centers" at Roskilde in 1972 and at Aalborg in 1974. These new institutions would differ from the traditional universities (Copenhagen, Aarhus, and Odense) in two important ways. First, some, though not all, of the faculties of the traditional Danish university (e.g. natural sciences, humanities, social sciences) would be merged with other disciplines (e.g. engineering, business administration, social work) which had hitherto been offered in separate institutions. Secondly, the university centers would offer a new experimental curriculum beginning with an interdisciplinary "basic course" in the first and, in some cases, the second years which would expose a student to a number of specialties leading to different degrees. The students would choose their degree programs after the basic course thus breaking the "lockstep" of making a final choice of study at entry. The new curriculum
would also differ from its traditional counterpart by being “project oriented.” Students would not complete a degree program by taking a set curriculum of standard courses but by embarking on a number of projects such as designing a bridge or studying the social consequences of the closing of a factory. Again the goal was to remove the rigidity which many thought hampered the old curriculum.

Though the plan for the university centers as devised by the Ministry of Education was to be the same in both institutions, the location of the two centers and their geographic relationship to existing institutions was quite different. Roskilde, located in a pastoral suburb 20 miles outside Copenhagen, was designed to relieve the overcrowding at Copenhagen University. Aalborg, located in a commercial and industrial city of 150,000 inhabitants in Northern Jutland, was to be the first university in a region which had long desired such an institution. It would also be the university which was most physically distant from the nation’s capital.

The setting of these two institutions emanating from the same plan was different and so has been their record of development over the decade when analyzed in terms of stability, autonomy and distinctiveness.

**Stability** as used here refers to the internal cohesion of the institution and specifically its ability to:

1. attract and hold both students and faculty
2. maintain its curriculum
3. preserve its internal organizational form.

**Autonomy** refers to the institution’s ability to remain self-governing and to protect itself from interference by outside agencies, namely the Parliament and the Ministry of Education.

**Distinctiveness** refers to the ability of the institution to differentiate itself from the traditional universities and establish some kind of institutional identity or uniqueness.

These three elements are obviously interrelated. Distinctiveness is a tool with which to achieve stability and stability is a factor in maintaining autonomy. This interrelatedness will figure heavily in the following discussion.

The case studies which follow were based on on-site visits and interviews conducted in November 1977 and again in June 1979. Unless otherwise noted, all statements from university members were made to the author at those times. Before moving to these case studies a few additional comments about changes in the overall Danish system in the 1970’s need to be made.

Before the first center opened the Danish Parliament passed legislation in 1970 which ended the traditional professorial control of the universities and replaced it with decision making bodies composed equally of teachers.