

INGVILD MARHEIM LARSEN

DEPARTMENTAL LEADERSHIP IN NORWEGIAN UNIVERSITIES – IN BETWEEN TWO MODELS OF GOVERNANCE?

1. INTRODUCTION

An accelerated pace of change is an obvious feature of university systems, putting questions of leadership and management of universities on the agenda. Change has also characterised the Norwegian higher education system since the 1980s. This trend will continue in the years to come as the higher education system in Norway faces a new comprehensive reform. A White Paper published in the spring of 2001 announced quality reform for higher education. The Ministry of Education and Research launched a number of major structural measures aimed at enhancing the ability and will to restructure higher education institutions. In order to secure and develop the quality of education and research and to increase control within educational institutions, the Ministry has proposed to strengthen academic leadership at the departmental level. The Ministry has recommended that heads of department should be appointed for a fixed term, and wants to give more power and instruments to the head of department. The intention is to give the head sufficient means to promote excellence in research. Consequently, the traditional leadership model, where the head of department is elected by and among academic staff and academic leadership is a temporary part-time job, is under pressure. However, the Ministry states that the adoption of this system should be voluntary. Since the new reform introduces a differentiated system of academic governance and management, the existing system (where the department head is elected) can carry on side-by-side with appointed leaders. If higher education institutions do choose the new system, this will mean a move from a collegial election system to appointed leaders approved at the institutional level. This is a development in line with international trends. The Netherlands, Sweden, Great Britain and Australia are examples of higher education systems that have moved from election to appointment of heads of department (Gulddahl Rasmussen 2002; Harman 2002; Henkel 2002).

The literature on leadership is overwhelming and there is no authoritative definition or understanding of what leadership actually comprises. Just as there are many definitions of leadership, so too there are many different approaches used to study leadership. The point of departure in this study is that leadership is concerned with influencing, and that leadership consists of a number of elements that constitute different roles. The amount of literature on leadership in higher education has also increased considerably. I will argue that studies and literature on leadership and

management in higher education often have a weak link to the primary tasks of the university, namely, teaching and research. My intention is to couple leadership to academic activities.

Based on empirical studies of academic leadership among heads of department and faculty staff, this chapter focuses on the roles of academic leaders at the departmental level in a period where leadership and management are coming increasingly into focus. The duties of heads of department are analysed through five roles based on activities and issues handled by the head with regard to teaching, research, personnel issues, political tasks and administration. These roles are used to try to identify the different elements departmental leadership consists of. The aim of this chapter is twofold. First, to shed light on staff expectations of departmental leadership: What do academic staff regard as being the duties and tasks of the head of department? Second, to explore the roles of the elected head of department in the present system: How do today's elected leaders interpret and describe their tasks and formal responsibilities? The underlying question of this analysis of leadership roles is: Are the universities moving from a traditional model of governance based on collegial, democratic and political characteristics to a more corporate style of management?

2. METHODOLOGY

The chapter draws on empirical data from different sources. First, from a survey conducted among tenured staff at the four Norwegian universities during the spring of 2001 (2,212 replies were received from 3,676 questionnaires distributed – a response rate of 60 per cent). Second, the chapter draws on interviews of 26 heads of department in six different disciplines at the four Norwegian universities in 2001. And third, the study is based on written material, primarily documents prepared by the Ministry of Education and Research.

The quality reform is expected to be implemented during 2003. Therefore, this study took place *prior* to the implementation of the reforms, and at a time when some of the proposed changes were already on the political agenda and being hotly debated. Thus, all heads of department in this study obtained their positions by election and were not appointed by institutional leadership. From 2003, higher education institutions can choose whether they want elected or appointed leaders and it remains to be seen what kind of arrangement will be preferred in different institutions – many faculty are divided on this issue. A survey conducted in 2001 among all tenured staff in the Norwegian universities showed that 40 per cent welcomed the appointment of heads of department, with 42 per cent against. Furthermore, the data showed that faculty were very negative to the head being appointed by institutional leadership. Less than 10 per cent were in favour of this procedure (Larsen 2002).

3. MODELS OF GOVERNANCE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Understanding leadership in an academic organisation depends on the organisational images and conceptual lenses used. Different organisational models mean different roles of leadership and, to some extent, the role of leader is a consequence of the organisation's characteristics. Many labels are used to characterise universities: collegial, professional, loosely coupled, political and decentralised, as well as organised anarchy. Since leadership at the departmental level is explored in this chapter, models that describe academic activities and basic units will be used. Other models are more appropriate when the focus is on the institutional level (the relationship between the levels) or the administration level.

Two models on governance in universities will be presented and the way these lead to different leadership roles will be discussed. Firstly, is a traditional model that includes collegial as well as political elements. Traditional understanding of universities highlights the uniqueness of academic organisation. In a knowledge society with many other kinds of knowledge-based and complex organisations, there is reason to ask what distinguishes universities from other knowledge organisations with personnel with high formal skills. Therefore, the second model used in the analysis is a newer perspective that sees the university as a knowledge enterprise in line with other knowledge organisations.

The point of departure is that different models of academic governance lead to different leadership roles. The questions are: What kind of leadership role(s) can be expected from the different perspectives of academic organisations?; and, more specifically: According to the two models, to what extent can the head of department be expected to provide teaching, research and personnel leadership, as well as be a politician and administrator?

Leadership comprises the practice of legitimised authority (Byrkjeflot and Halvorsen 1997: 56). In order to be successful, a leader must have legitimacy among employees. There are several different sources of legitimacy in order to be able to practise leadership. There is a question of what provides leadership legitimacy within a university context when so many are sceptical of the concepts of management and leadership. The legitimacy of leadership is both a question of the leader's position, and the nature of the tasks to be pursued. Legitimacy can be based on legal or formal authority, authority based on expertise, or charismatic authority. The position as head of department, as a formal position, can contribute to legitimacy, but is no guarantee for leadership legitimacy (Birnbau 1992: 14). Moreover, a distinction can be made between formal and informal leaders where those in a formal leadership role do not always practise leadership, and where those who do show leadership do not always hold the position of formal leader. The other question is *what* may legitimately be the object for leadership in an academic institution. Legitimacy both as a consequence of position and the nature of the tasks will be central topics in the presentation of the two governance models.



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