

## Research and Innovation in the Educational Sector – FINNUT

# Effects of changes in leadership and management structures in Nordic higher education

### Objective

This study investigates the relationship between changes in leadership and managerial structures and teaching and research performance in public universities across the Nordic countries, in the last decade. It is driven by the following research problem:

- *To what extent are changes in leadership and management structures related to shifts in teaching and research performance in public universities across the Nordic countries in the last decade?*

### Background

Reforms inspired by the New Public Management (NPM), and concomitant calls for increasing accountability and efficiency, have had a profound effect in the internal structures and governance arrangements of public higher education institutions in the Nordic countries. Yet, few studies have systematically and comparatively investigated the effects – both teaching and research performance – of such so-called “modernization” efforts.

### Status of knowledge

The environmental conditions under which Nordic higher education institutions operate have changed dramatically, particularly so in the last decade. Policy efforts aimed at modernizing the sector have paid considerable attention to the way in which public universities operate. A privileged focus has been attributed to aspects such as efficiency, effectiveness and accountability. In addition to managing their internal operations in a more cost efficient manner, public universities, in the Nordic countries and elsewhere, are increasingly expected to respond adequately to the needs of various external stakeholder groups. One of the (many) mechanisms being used to achieve these goals lies on enhancing the rationalization of internal structures and activities by, inter alia, promoting professional management. As a result, most Nordic universities have developed extended administrative structures (central and unit levels) capable of strategically supporting their primary activities, and some have introduced recent changes in the nomination of formal leaders, e.g. appointed rather than elected.

### Research questions and methodology

The study addresses *three* main questions, namely:

- What are the *drivers* promoting the rationalization of academic activities more generally and the rise of managerialism across Nordic higher education more specifically?
- How have internal *actors*, academics and administrators alike, reacted to external (government) and/or internal (organizational) efforts aimed at strengthening the managerial structures (central and unit levels) of universities?
- What can be said about the *effects* – quantitative vs. qualitative; structural vs. cultural; short vs. long-term, etc. – of changes in leadership/managerial structures in the teaching and research performance of individual sub-units across specific disciplines and/or sub-disciplinary domains?

The study adopts a mixed-methods approach based on the combination of a variety of data sources – desk-top analysis of key documents and official statistics, interviews, and a survey questionnaire (targeting key actors at the system and organizational level).

### Relevance to society

Reform efforts are both costly and demanding, and it is necessary to account for the extent thorough which they end up generating the expected results. Higher education has been identified as a key sector of the economy, and therefore it is necessary to take stock of the ways in which the sector has changed (with a special focus on performance) as a result of government-led or initiated reform efforts.

The project, which is led by the University of Agder (Norway), is a joint collaboration between Nordic higher education institutions and involves the following researchers:

- *Rómulo Pinheiro* (project manager), University of Agder, Norway
- *Lars Geschwind*, KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Sweden
- *Elias Pekkola & Jussi Kivistö*, University of Tampere, Finland
- *Timo Aarvaara*, University of Helsinki, Finland
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### About the programme

The *Programme for Research and Innovation in the Educational Sector – FINNUT*, is a ten-year research initiative on education. The programme finances research projects on themes linked to ECEC, primary and secondary school, upper secondary education and training, higher education and adult skills. The main goal of the programme is to develop new high-quality knowledge that is relevant for policy development, administration, the practice field and the individual, to contribute to renewal of the research field, and to encourage innovation in the educational sector.

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