

What is gained outwardly must not be lost inwardly

The University Act of 2003 has been successful in strengthening the universities' relationships with the outside world. However, there are significant challenges in the internal governance and management of universities, particularly concerning democratic culture and academic freedom. DFIR believes that part of the solution is to enhance university leadership's focus on employee involvement, co-determination, security, and academic freedom, as well as to grant universities genuine autonomy and greater financial stability.

On May 24, 2023, DFIR will conclude the project "Universities for the Future," which, in light of the 20th anniversary of the 2003 University Act, has examined whether the governance and funding structure of universities is future-proof. The project is based on two surveys conducted among all assistant professors, associate professors, full professors, and department heads at Danish universities. The quantitative results presented below are derived from these surveys. Additionally, DFIR has interviewed 21 stakeholders, and their contributions are summarized in a separate dialogue book. DFIR has also discussed observations and partial analyses in both a national and international context.

A Broad-Based Culture of Knowledge Exchange

The University Act of 2003 was the first step in a series of reforms aimed at opening universities to society and ensuring greater societal value. DFIR concludes that the University Act and subsequent reforms have successfully established a broad-based culture of knowledge exchange and collaboration with external stakeholders. While there are differences across main areas, Danish universities in 2023 are oriented toward societal needs.

96%

of researchers have engaged in research collaborations, consultancy, continuing education, or other dissemination activities in the past 2 years.

On average, a researcher at a Danish university has been involved in four research collaborations, six consultancy

or continuing education activities, and eight dissemination activities in the last two years. Only four percent of researchers have not engaged in any form of knowledge exchange or collaboration with external parties during this period.

There is potential to further strengthen universities' collaboration with external stakeholders. However, future efforts should focus on improving the quality of collaboration rather than significantly increasing the quantity.

Challenges to Democratic Culture

During the same period that universities have developed strong external relationships, their internal democratic culture has been challenged. For example, 50 percent of researchers fear, have been threatened with, or have experienced reprisals for speaking out about management decisions. There is a widespread desire among researchers for greater involvement, especially in decisions regarding research profile, budget, and organization. This desire is consistent across job categories and main areas.

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of researchers fear, have been threatened with, or have experienced reprisals for expressing their opinions on management decisions.

There is significant variation between departments at Danish universities. Some departments have successfully established a healthy democratic culture. DFIR assesses that the potential for good governance, including employee involvement and co-determination, exists but is not fully utilized.

Academic Freedom Under Pressure

Furthermore, DFIR concludes that academic freedom is under pressure, particularly for the 24% of researchers working on scientifically controversial topics. Within this group, 71% fear, have been threatened with, or have experienced reprisals.

The University Act also stipulates that researchers should not be assigned tasks for their entire working

hours over an extended period, effectively limiting their academic freedom. It is therefore concerning that about 30% of researchers have been assigned obligations in the past two years that significantly limit their research time, or have spent less than 20% of their working hours on research.

Institutional Autonomy and Financial Robustness

University management operates within a framework defined by the universities' overall governance and funding structure. Universities have had to quickly adapt to a changing political context with numerous reforms that have diverted significant resources from universities and shifted management's focus away from core tasks.

Additionally, the funding framework limits management's autonomy. External grants come with indirect costs, which are primarily financed by the basic research funds. At the same time, the top 20% of successful grant recipients receive 90% of the competitive external research funds.

74%

of researchers have received less than 50,000 DKK from the university for research expenses in the past 2 years and are therefore dependent on external funding.

DFiR notes that 24% of researchers in the past two years have neither received funding from the university for research expenses nor external funding as the primary applicant.

At the same time, nearly 40% of researchers spend more than 10% of their time applying for and managing external funds, and an additional 40% spend more than 10% of their time on other administrative tasks.

Necessary Changes

DFiR believes that the quality and relevance of universities can be enhanced through a strengthened democratic culture. This includes the board and management focusing on inclusion and co-determination, supporting employee participation in significant decisions, and strengthening employees' mandate in hiring their own leaders. This should be monitored and evaluated through universities' Workplace Assessment (APV) measurements and framework contracts.

DFiR further believes that the potential for good governance can be supported by enhancing universities' autonomy and financial robustness. Therefore, DFiR makes several recommendations to achieve this, such as equal

economic conditions, building ownership, longer grant horizons, and rewarding EU funding acquisition.

The recommendations regarding financial robustness should be realized through the establishment of a commission to develop a national research and innovation strategy. This includes proposing a long-term and sustainable funding structure for universities, making them less vulnerable to short-term political considerations. The commission should work to strengthen institutional autonomy, ensure equal framework conditions in the university sector, reduce researchers' time spent on grant applications, and improve career pathways for the next generation of researchers.

Should the University Act Be Changed?

DFiR does not believe that a deeper reform of the governance structure at universities, including changing the unitary management structure and the University Act, is needed at this time. Universities face massive challenges that require agile and competent leadership, finding local solutions in close collaboration with employees and external partners. DFiR believes that such leadership is best achieved with a unitary management structure that acts based on DFiR's recommendations.

Next Steps

On May 24, the report will be discussed at the conference [Udfordringer og visioner for danske universiteter](#), held in collaboration with the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters. Analyses by the Think Tank DEA and the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters will also be presented at this event.

DFiR sees this event as the first step in a hopefully thorough public debate about the challenges universities face and their future role in society. DFiR wishes to promote this debate and, as far as possible, provide background data to organizations wishing to work at a general level. Interested parties are welcome to contact DFiR to discuss supplementary analyses based on the material.

Read the main report "Universities for the Future" [here](#).



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