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Democratic culture gradually eroded

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Democratic culture gradually eroded

Palle Rasmussen, emeritus professor

This year marks 50 years since I started working at what was then called Aalborg University Centre. My first employment was humble; I was an hourly paid student representative in the board of studies for a humanities foundation year. The university was being established and had not yet admitted students, so representatives in governing bodies were brought in from other universities. I lived and studied in Copenhagen, but I frequently travelled to meetings in Aalborg. Among other things, I took part in meetings with Aalborg Teacher Training College about planned the integration of teacher education in the university, but this idea was quickly stopped by the then Liberal government.

After three quarters of a year, I stopped working in Aalborg because I had to finish my own education. But in 1977 I was again employed at Aalborg University, this time as an assistant professor; later I became associate professor and then full professor. Today, I am no longer employed at AAU, but still have affiliation as "emeritus professor", with access to participate in research work.

50 years is a long time, a large part of a life course. It gives reason to look back and consider the changes that Aalborg University has gone through. When it was established, the university was a bearer of some significant ideas and initiatives for the renewal of Danish higher education. Among these ideas was the problem-focused project work, which meant that students were to work directly with conditions and challenges in business, society and culture; and the foundation years, which meant that the education programmes had to focus initially on broad common subjects and only gradually were to be specialised. It was also intended that the university should accommodate a broader range of education programmes than the traditional university studies, and that it should cultivate socially relevant research in close interaction with many players in the North Jutland region.

In some ways, these original ideas are difficult to find in today's Aalborg University. The foundation years and the idea of a common entrance to related education programmes have disappeared and been replaced by professional specialization and an emphasis on efficiency right from the start of studies. Cooperation across disciplines, which was initially strong, is today very limited. It also reflects the fact that the university has grown large, with many strong centres of educational and research; centres that want to – and to a certain extent are able to – manage on their own.

Other changes reflect the general development in the political and institutional framework for Danish university education. The University Act, which after many years of tug-of-war was introduced in 2002 by a coalition government of Social Democrats and Social Liberals, centralized the management system of universities to an unprecedented degree. Where managers under the previous Governance Act were elected or nominated by broad groups of employees and students, managers are now employees in a hierarchical system. The result has been a gradual erosion of democratic organizational culture, not only at Aalborg University, but also here. Teachers and students have to perform on many fronts, and when they are not invited to participate in debates and decisions, they do not.

The requirements for performance and work effort have also grown strongly over the years. In my first years as a teacher in the social sciences, it was common for a teacher to supervise 2-3 project groups. Today, the number of supervision tasks has often tripled, while the requirements for publishing research have simultaneously been increased.

A further change is the increasing reliance on external funding. Universities are public institutions, and funds for their teaching and research are allocated in the National Finance Act. But there has been

increasingly strong political pressure for research funding to be "open to competition". More and more of the university research funds have to be obtained through applications to the national research councils, to private foundations and to other actors. At Aalborg University as well as elsewhere, much research effort is prioritized to suit potential funders rather than responding to societal needs.

Much has thus changed since Aalborg University started. As an employee, I have followed the development in my roles as teacher, researcher, and head of studies or of research. The original ideas reflected an optimistic expectation that the university's students and researchers could contribute to a better, more enlightened and democratic society. To some extent they have probably done that, but it has not been possible to uphold core ideas in the original foundations of the university, primarily because the political governance of Danish universities has been characterized by narrow understandings of efficiency and usefulness. However, one core principle has been upheld and protected: the problem-based project work. Today, this type of study takes place under more difficult conditions and often in other shapes than those envisaged when Aalborg University started; but it is still a guiding principle in the study programmes. Empirical studies as well as statements from students I have taught over the years confirm that the project work has a significant impact on the competencies of graduates.

Aalborg University has become a large and in many ways a well-functioning institution, but not as committed and innovative as originally intended. The German social theorist Jürgen Habermas has pointed out that universities should not only provide expert knowledge, but also scientifically based assessments of the present and of the role of science in culture and society. This should continue to be an ambition for Aalborg University.

The text is an English translation of a feature published in Danish in the newspaper "Nordjyske" on 26 July 2023