Chapter 9
Academic Subjectivities at Stake – Different University Contexts, Different Responses to Reform

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9.1 Introduction

In Chap. 8, I delineated the interdependence as well as the plasticity of entities like universities and academic subjects. The meaning of the university has always been part of fierce strategic battles between dominant discourses in society and subject to relations of power within which it only occupies a relative and lesser position (Bourdieu 1988; Kjærgaard and Kristensen 2003). Likewise, the position of the academic subject is no free-floating entity. It is largely determined by the position and purpose of that subject within dominant university discourses at any given time. In Chap. 8, the plasticity of the subject position of the academic was illustrated with reference to the long historical developments of the meaning of university, as well as the swift changes in dominant university discourses that took place in Denmark from the late 1960s until the early 2000s – from what I label 'a democratic and *Humboldtian* university discourse' towards 'a knowledge economy discourse'.

This does not mean, however, that the subject position of the academic is confined to the mere straitjacket of a single rigid discourse that rules at any given time and leaves no space for manoeuvre. As outlined in Chap. 8, each university represented its own strategic space for any dominant external discourse to be fitted into. As will be developed further in this chapter, this created at each university particular spaces for manoeuvre in the form of different academic styles and university, faculty and department profiles. The breaks between the new dominant knowledge economy discourse, the receding democratic and *Humboldtian* discourse and other active discourses at each particular university setting can thus be exploited and opened up to contesting discourses that may impact the conditions for balancing the self-construction of an academic subject.

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This chapter captures a key moment of transition from 2005 to 2007, when Danish universities were preparing to embrace the emblematic 2003 University Law and its new signifiers and political technologies. I will follow in ethnographic detail how academic subjects dealt with the constraints and possibilities of new signifiers and political technologies as these were embedded and negotiated in particular university and departmental contexts. In doing so, I draw on qualitative research interviews, various documents, and observations from two departments at each of three universities chosen for this study[1]: one multifaculty university, one specialist university and a 'reform' university. This material was mainly gathered between late spring 2005 and late spring 2006. It was supported by previous pilot studies at most Danish universities and analyses of documents and literature that shed light on the reform of Danish universities at local, national as well as international levels.

Theoretically, this chapter is conceived within the same Foucault-inspired framework as outlined in Chap. 8 (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982; Foucault 1971; Simola et al. 1998). The chapter applies this framework to more close-up studies of how academic subjects within particular university settings were coming to grips with new conditions for shaping academic subjectivities. Here, academics are conceived of as individuals who become academic subjects by making use of and negotiating the spaces for manoeuvre available within the different university discourses – the democratic and *Humboldtian* discourse and the knowledge economy discourse in particular. The concepts of floating signifiers and political technologies embedded in a discourse analysis framework are employed to conceive of how the relations between knowledge, power and subjectivity emerge in non-deterministic ways as a new dominant knowledge-economy discourse dislodges the previous dominance of a democratic and *Humboldtian* discourse.

This approach serves as a lens to map academic subjects' spaces for manoeuvre and their changing subjectivities in ways that are loyal to the complexities of these processes (Krejsler and Carney 2009; Krejsler 2006, 2013). This chapter suggests that such spaces emerge as strategic spaces of potential openings and closures when new discursive regimes interact with older regimes that represent the memory, culture and history of each particular university setting. The elements of contesting discursive regimes may be partially silenced, but as will be clear from this chapter, data show that such context specific knowledge and practices still work within the emerging dominant regimes in struggles to give meaning to floating signifiers (e.g. 'excellence' or 'quality') and struggles to implement, in ways that make sense on the local level, the practices suggested by particular political technologies (e.g. the development contract or the bibliometric research indicator). The processes of change introduced by the knowledge economy discourse certainly reconfigured and gave direction to the daily struggles that academic, manager and student subjects

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[1] See Chap. 8 for a more general context regarding how the three universities referred to in this chapter have responded to the transition from the receding democratic and *Humboldtian* discourse to the knowledge economy discourse, and Chap. 1 for a general introduction to all the case study universities in the context of university reform.

were obliged to engage in. They did not, however, make the outcomes of these struggles predictable in any deterministic sense.

9.2   Changing Conditions for Academic Subjects and Their Spaces for Discursive Positioning

The new regime, which was ushered in by the rise of the knowledge economy discourse, had forced universities to pay considerably more attention to continuously monitoring whether the right mix of academic staff was available. This included monitoring whether academic staff were up to date with the knowledge and skills that matched the demands of the imagined marketplace, which the knowledge economy discourse brought into existence.[2] Leaders at all levels, from rector to dean and head of department, were delegated enlarged powers to ensure that this turn-around would take place. Heads of department were now encouraged more explicitly to ensure that the academic subjects did their research in prioritised core areas within department strategies, be they more or less tightly organised (*FORSKERforum* 2005b: 10–11). This should be seen in a context where leaders were now appointed from the level above, as opposed to previously being elected by constituencies of academic and technical staff from below; i.e. leaders' loyalties had formally shifted from being part of the staff to being part of a leadership team. As will be seen, this was handled very differently by different heads of department at different universities.

In order to make faculties and departments sensitive to this competitive turn, financial resources within universities were increasingly distributed according to the logics of political technologies like the taximeter system, which served to allocate funding to and within the university according to the number of students that particular departments managed to attract and get through the system, or the competitive instruments of external research funding that departments and their academic subjects must attract in order not to be reduced to largely teaching universities. An increasing number of mergers took place between departments that would otherwise not be able to survive according to the market logic constructed by the knowledge economy discourse.

Here, humanities departments were particularly vulnerable (*FORSKERforum* 2004: 12–15). They did not fit the government's new criteria for strategic research areas (mainly nanoscience, medical and technical sciences) and they did not have the immediate appeal to those external sponsors from the industries and other stake-

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[2] As argued in Chap. 8, this constructed marketplace was hardly more than a quasi-market – or a market in name only – as universities are by and large still owned and controlled by the state. The state is also by far the biggest funder of universities. Furthermore, it can be disputed whether university governing boards are more than boards in name only, as the government and the ministry's civil servants are constantly criticised for interfering in university affairs, often in great detail (see Chap. 6 in this book).

holders who were looking for a clear prospect of utility. The threat of job cuts at humanities departments around the country was thus imminent, and unsurprisingly, my interviews demonstrated that humanities academics were more hostile and fearful towards recent university reforms than academic subjects within fields like natural, food and health science. The latter had more entrenched traditions of dealing and collaborating with businesses, seeking patents, thinking in terms of utility and so forth. Several academic subjects in humanities mentioned that they did not have the same tradition for publishing in international, peer reviewed journals as did the natural and health sciences. Many humanities disciplines dealt with issues that were closely linked to national or regional culture, and consequently often of marginal interest to international journals that were largely Anglo-American.

In order to sensitise each individual academic subject to the emerging knowledge economy discourse and its signifiers and political technologies, departments increasingly put academic staff under pressure to generate income equivalent to their salary in the sense that they must publish internationally, attract sufficient external funding, teach enough students who passed, etc. My material, however, shows great variation in how this was done in different places.

9.3   The Traditional University Between Resilience and Ominous Expectation

At *the old, traditional multi-faculty university,* the new demands had only seeped down to individual academic subjects very slowly. From the inception of the 2003 University Law until early 2007, the academic staff at natural science departments as well as at the humanities departments that I researched did not seem very aware of university reform, with the notable exceptions of heads of department and other staff in management positions. The latter were required to deal with policy signals from the university management. Everybody had seen changes in the sense that they had experienced mergers of smaller departments into bigger ones; however, departmental leaders found it hard to gather academic staff for meetings about policy changes, as academic staff felt that concrete changes were far-off. The humanities department seemed so centrifugal that it was hard to determine whether departmental governance meant very much beyond teaching requirements. As one assistant professor stated, he identified more with his discipline than with his department:

> Well, I do not think it means that much where you are placed … Having vibrant contact with a network of researchers from mainly the US and England, it is less important whether I am placed in Copenhagen, Aarhus, Edinburgh or somewhere else. No matter what, I would still have these contacts. There is hardly any institution in the world that can offer an academically fully satisfactory environment. It is one's own obligation as a researcher to establish a network, or that is what I feel. To me it was mostly a question of which country and which institution could offer working traditions that I could relate to, and simultaneously offered financial conditions to enable the kind of research that I find ideal. And altogether this university comes out quite well, because of the academic tradition at my department and because of the opportunities to travel and maintain contacts, by way of

participating in and convening conferences. (Assistant professor, humanities, multi-faculty university, 2005)

To this assistant professor, the signifier of 'academic freedom', which occupied such an important space within the democratic and *Humboldtian* university discourse, still seemed to offer considerable potential for resistance at this university. In 2005, a renowned professor attributed this resilience to the fact that this university was among the largest in the country, boasted centuries-old traditions and had long been governed bottom-up. This complexity had made it very difficult to govern from the level of the rector, so the dean and department levels had been dominant. According to this academic subject, it thus remained to be seen what kind of impact the new dominant university discourse would have. The point was that the political technologies, which aimed at making academic subjects accountable upwards, were still very weak at department level. The introduction of the political technology of appraisal interviews was still in the preparatory phase. A research monitoring system hardly existed. As it was said by the head of department at the humanities department, as long as you do your teaching and do not publish less than an average of two articles a year over a two-year period, you should not experience any trouble. The dark side of this seemingly large space for manoeuvre for the individual academic subject seemed to be the isolation and exclusion that some felt or feared. This was especially the case for young academic subjects, PhD students in particular, who were outside the informal networks of old-time established academic staff (*Magisterbladet* 2003a, b, c).

Changes as a result of reforms in the wake of the knowledge-economy discourse had been seeping in, though, and reactions were gradually building up. The subject positions of the 'democratic and *Humboldtian* university regime' were gradually being dislodged by those of the 'knowledge-economy regime': elected rectors, deans and heads of departments had been replaced by appointed ones, the senate by a governing board, a number of accountability-inspired political technologies were being introduced, and so forth. In the spring of 2007, however, a publicly noticeable response erupted at the humanities faculty, when the newly appointed dean announced the introduction of a political technology aimed at measuring research productivity (*FORSKERforum* 2007b: 16–17). Academic subjects' outputs were to be differentiated into categories, each category meriting a particular number of comparable points. A doctoral thesis was to be made comparable to a certain number of peer reviewed journal articles; a monograph should equal three articles (Wright 2014). This was the beginning of what was later to be implemented as the political technology of the bibliometric research indicator. At the time, this led to a heated debate in the internal faculty newsletter, and ultimately to a highly publicised petition signed by a large number of academic subjects. The petition criticised this political technology for quantifying and making academic productions comparable in ways that unjustly twisted what academic work in the humanities was all about. The dean apparently softened her line, saying that she had been misunderstood, that the whole thing was mainly about signalling that a debate was needed about how

humanities would deal with increasing demands, and that productivity must be made more visible and comparable.

This reaction seemed to have been forestalled when the head of a humanities department expressed his fears in interviews in 2005 and 2006. He complained that academic staff had very little information about the reforms that were then on their way. Most academic staff never attended meetings that were relevant to the department's future; they just went on with business as usual. This head of department predicted that the kind of change that could really make a difference in relation to the working conditions of department and academic subjects would be decisions that increasingly introduced the political technology of result contracts, which specified how many students needed to pass, how many articles must be published, how much money must be raised from external sources, etc. From his experience with university administration, he reckoned that the logic of such policy changes would be that the rector would impose such demands upon the deans, who would pass it on to the heads of department, who would be forced to pass the obligation on to the academic subjects:

> How else should such demands be accomplished? … Hitherto, however, the development contracts have not had any significant effect on the way that the academic workers think. Most hardly know what a development contract means (Head of department, humanities, multi-faculty university, 2005)

This head of department had felt it a rather lonely task to build up some kind of strategy of response to what he knew would come sooner or later and, he thought, take most of the remainder of the academic subjects at the department by surprise. His work with the department's development plan 2006–2009 reflected his attempt to prepare his department for the political technologies that he saw were on their way. He foresaw the increasing pressure to appear productive and accountable in the sense of the knowledge-economy discourse, which was a justified and timely concern given that in 2007 the new dean attempted to introduce a technology for measuring research productivity. Most of the department's 2006–2009 development plan dealt with issues like formulating the department's core fields and priority areas for the years to come. His strategy for coming to terms with the floating signifier of accountability and the political technologies in its wake gravitated around four main issues: publication strategy, other indicators, research management/leadership and recruiting policy. The head of department aimed at conducting annual appraisal interviews with each permanently employed academic subject in order to come to a shared understanding of work assignments, career potential and competency development.

This head of department's space for manoeuvre was clearly confined by the context of a department hampered by centrifugal tendencies. Even the constituent units from two previous mergers pretty much kept themselves to themselves along pre-merger and disciplinary lines. Academic staff seemed to orientate themselves more towards their external networks than networks within the department. It could be argued that this departmental context was infused with an autonomy discourse that secured individual space for manoeuvre or, at least, made room for a high level of

detachment from constricting demands from organisational visions, milestones, targets and the like. To be sure, the floating signifiers of 'academic freedom' and other so-called *Humboldtian* terms were often hinted at.

Such a departmental context served as a brake on a knowledge-economy discourse that was not perceived to appreciate the particular features of many humanities disciplines. Nonetheless, it could be argued with equal justification that the lack of a coherent and explicit strategy backed by academic subjects proved to become highly dangerous when demands from the knowledge-economy discourse moved from the board and university management onwards into the capillary veins of the university. The above-mentioned 2007 incident showed a capacity for contestation. However, it seemed to lack – at least for the time being – a coherent response that could be formulated as a contesting interpretation of the dominant floating signifiers of 'efficiency' and 'accountability'. Therefore, further external demands and political technologies linked to funding and resources could certainly be expected.

There were, nonetheless, a few conspicuous attempts on the part of this department to enter into strategies that appeared more directly compatible with the demands of the knowledge-economy discourse. A course in business humanities was being developed. According to the head of department, this course had been established as a response to the fact that many graduates from the department had gone to Copenhagen Business School and elsewhere to take supplementary courses in order to enhance their opportunities to get a job:

> We made an enquiry, where we asked our students and graduates what they missed in particular in our courses. Our intention was that we might as well offer courses on such issues ourselves … Consequently, we elaborated a draft within some areas that were in particularly high demand: organisation, communication, Human Resource Development and so forth. We then contacted potential employers for our graduates to hear their opinions about our ideas; not the Confederation of Danish Industry [the employers' association representing major industries in Denmark], but rather major companies themselves such as Maersk [a major world-wide shipping company], Nordea [a major Nordic banking business] and others. We are now in dialogue with the ministry in order to have the course authorised. We will probably not get full acceptance. This is an example of the increased attention to servicing students. And the funding was also obtained from particular ministerial funding resources aimed at furthering just that kind of specific purposes (Head of department, humanities, multi-faculty university, 2006).

This example showed how the government's signals that universities should focus more on their students' future employability could be furthered by setting aside funding resources for particular purposes. This indirect technology for steering universities simultaneously stimulated the applicants to adapt to the knowledge economy discourse and gave them a feeling of at least some autonomy.

The resistance to the knowledge-economy regime and its ensuing political technologies was, however, far from universal and univocal at this university. Contrary to many of their older colleagues, the earlier mentioned humanities assistant professor as well as another assistant professor at a natural science department did not lament the vanishing democratic and *Humboldtian* discourse. They claimed that the democratic and *Humboldtian* discourse had fostered an opaque power structure at department level. According to them, informal networks of old-time associate pro-

fessors and professors, who were all employed within a short period of time some decades ago, had hogged the democratic old structure to an extent that these younger colleagues felt excluded and under-informed. The assistant professor at the natural science department thus said: 'Well, somehow I think it [the current situation] has a lot to do with the fact that, here and elsewhere, a heap of staff were employed over a relatively short period of time some thirty to forty years ago'.

Both assistant professors saw the potential benefits of having an appointed instead of an elected leadership. The assistant professor at the natural science department thus added:

> Personally, I am not afraid of the new law or appointed leaders. It can only become better than what I have experienced during my 10 years at this place … I simply find it a mess that colleagues lead colleagues, who then get replaced in four years at the next election and so forth … I realised that when some years ago there were a number of colleagues who were to be dismissed. That process was handled in an extremely amateurish way … That made me aware that it simply does not work that a person on these corridors, who will be your peer in two years' time, is to decide who is going to get the sack because he is incidentally elected head of department right now … I simply prefer a professional who knows how to administrate, how to save money and who simply knows how to get things done more professionally (Assistant professor, life sciences, multi-faculty university, 2005).

This conflict of interest between assistant and associate/full professors was obviously exacerbated by the fact that only every second assistant professor in Denmark subsequently acquired permanent employment in an associate professorship (*FORSKERforum* 2005a: 6–7, *Magisterbladet* 2003b, c). In Denmark although there is no tenure, a postdoctoral employee may initially aspire to an assistant professorship, which may or may not lead to an associate professorship. The associate professorship is still widely regarded as a permanent position, even though this is currently being challenged as the knowledge-economy discourse increasingly brings in the argument that academic subjects' employment should be assessed continuously in terms of their record for external funding, publication and/or teaching.

9.4 The Hard Science University – The Willing 'Frontrunner' of Reform

At *the mono-faculty specialist university* (see footnote 1), a considerably smaller university within the life sciences, the new dominant discourse had affected lives of individual academic subjects considerably more directly. Here, the management had made a point of being 'frontrunners' in implementing the 2003 University Law. They had strengthened the already existing top-down management and worked on implementing political technologies in the form of standardised quality assurance measures and performance indicators across the university in order to make all units comparable and generate detailed information about each unit as a background for making strategic decisions and allocating resources.

The effects of this approach on academic subjects could be seen in action at *a department of science related to food* that was chosen as a pilot case for implementing this governance regime. Here, a very systematic structure was created from the head of department down through a number of research sections to each individual academic subject. Political technologies in the form of regular group appraisal interviews with the sections, as well as individual appraisal interviews, were implemented in order to generate a high level of information about the department's priorities down through the organisation and produce a high level of information about details of implementation and additional knowledge about productivity up through the system. Heads of sections interviewed individual academic staff and the head of department interviewed heads of section. This system was linked to performance indicators at individual as well as section level in order to generate performance indicators at department level, which served as background material for the regular negotiations with the university management about future priorities and the allocation of resources. These performance indicators were formulated in result terms, and basically required each academic subject to annually raise 1½ million DKK (approximately 200,000 Euros) of external funding, publish two articles each year in international peer-reviewed journals, teach a certain amount of hours and be active in the media. The interviews clearly showed that these demands were felt as a heavy burden. As the head of a research section within the department, who was himself a professor, said:

> Well, heads of research sections are being evaluated differently than before. We now have these performance indicators to comply with. That means that the section I lead will have to deliver a certain quota of teaching, which is measured according to a standardised annual student growth unit [cf. the taximeter calculus described earlier], and we need to gather a certain amount of externally financed research projects, which are simply measures in kroner and øre [Danish currency]. And evidently I, being the head of a research section, am obliged to look closely into what each individual academic worker in my research section may achieve. And they are told that if they do not perform up to standard, if they cannot deliver externally financed project money in sufficient amounts … Well, then they find themselves in an unpleasant situation. And well, there you can say that you lose some of your autonomy as a researcher, because you are forced to go for money that you would not normally go for, because you consider it to be slightly outside your field (Head of research section, life sciences, mono-faculty specialist university, 2005).

Even long-time associate professors did not feel any safer in their employment. The academic subjects knew that failure to comply with these performance indicators would very quickly bring unpleasant attention to them individually and might eventually jeopardise their position. A long-time associate professor noted:

> We are subject to considerable pressure to be visible and to finance our own positions … Whether you dare speak your opinions out loud depends, I would say, upon who you are … For, as you know, one's position has to be renegotiated continually (Associate professor, life sciences, mono-faculty specialist university, 2006).

Some space for manoeuvre was available, however, even within such a tightly managed performance regime. At section level, for instance, the head might recalibrate these demands to some extent by allowing a star researcher to research more

and teach less, and a star teacher to teach more and research less. Also, the individual performance data were aggregated at department level before they were sent off to the central university authorities, which ultimately gave heads of sections as well as the head of department some space for taking into account individual considerations where it was found to be justified in a long-term perspective. At this department, which again differed from other departments at the same university, academic subjects were required to continuously document that they were able to maintain a level of productivity and develop a competency profile that matched the changing demands imposed on the department. Several authors have referred to such governance as performativity regimes that risk putting more emphasis on second-order activities, such as documenting research and teaching, than on the first-order activities themselves, i.e. research and teaching (Ball 2003; Dean 1999; Power 1997). Here, the academic subject was, to a relatively large extent, vested with the insignia of the private entrepreneur to make contract-like agreements with their department and university within a quasi-market system, which, paradoxically, was still largely a state monopoly within a Danish context. The head of a research section within this department elaborated with clarity how this entrepreneurial ethic was increasingly making its way into the minds of academic subjects:

> Within your local research environment you increasingly become responsible for your own job security. This becomes particularly visible through the performance indicators. Permanent employment is gradually being turned into an illusion … Within a private enterprise the manager is responsible for bringing home assignments to the company. At the university, however, things are more mixed up, as academic workers are also responsible for procuring assignments … But funding of research is complicated, as it is very competitive. If you are dealing with a hot issue, then you easily get two to three researchers competing about who should be allowed to make the bid for the funding in question. Here, it may even be an advantage to let several researchers make the bid for the same funding … It obviously becomes very prevalent within such an environment that researchers keep their cards very close to their chest. Some work on it in smaller groups (Head of research section, life sciences, mono-faculty specialist university, 2005).

At this department, research freedom had been severely curtailed as strategic management was implemented. The idea of having steady employment eroded more and more, as the introduction of political technologies of the accountability kind made employment increasingly dependent upon whether you could finance yourself, be visible and match the priorities of the department/university. Dissemination of research to the wider public was upgraded to count on an equal level with scientific publication at this department, even though scientific publication demanded much greater preparatory effort. At the time, the department was not able to attract sufficient numbers of qualified students, which squeezed the department's economy, given that a standard payment per student who passed their exams was one of the key criteria for the allocation of government funding. As a consequence, pretty much all who applied to take the department's education courses had to be accepted for enrolment, which meant a lowering of quality. The pressure to show how research had an immediate relevance to business life might push the balance between basic research and applied research in a negative direction in the

longer term, according to several interviewees. It had also become more difficult to strike a coherent balance between professional and private life.

Another department staged a different and apparently more self-confident space for manoeuvre in relation to the emerging knowledge economy university discourse. This was *a centre that dealt with issues related to forestry and landscape*, the result of a merger a few years earlier between parts of a previous mono-faculty specialist university department and a considerably larger government research institute (*sekt orforskningsinstitut).*[3] The centre manager described the approach of the centre by referring to a number of floating signifiers that evoked the modern, business-like flat structure approach that was so hailed by the emerging dominant knowledge-economy discourse, which he contrasted to the so-called traditional hierarchies of the university. He emphasised the 'front personnel', i.e. the academic as well as administrative personnel that established, maintained and nurtured contacts with external partners on a day to day level. The centre furthermore had its own 'board', like a business, where three ministries were represented (the ministries of environmental affairs, foreign affairs and education). This meant that they put money into the centre as well. The centre manager found it very fruitful to have this independent board, as it represented a venue where the ministries could make sure that their interests were taken care of. The manager evoked floating signifiers as he expressed his concern with protecting the more 'flexible' and 'efficient' centre. He considered that 'the university culture is very bureaucratic and insensitive to the demands of the surrounding world and its stakeholders'. He criticised this

> 'more closed, inward-looking approach, where administration is rather looking to satisfying their own demand for documentation than solving the problems and tasks in interaction with the stakeholders out there in the real world (Centre manager, life sciences, mono-faculty specialist university, 2005).

In contrast, he described the centre as often 'much more sensitive to external demands'. The centre's approach, according to him, opened another dynamic for the academic subjects to develop ideas and go out and try to find interested external partners. According to the manager, 'the centre is more flexible, and the administration is there to nurture the needs and good ideas of academic workers'. He thus yearned for more professional administration, and not for the professional autonomy that was felt threatened by many in most of the other university contexts. This discourse regarding the centre as a unit that was already conditioned to be flexible

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[3] A *sektorforskningsinstitut* is a research institution that is closely connected with a particular ministry. It solves research, advisory, educative and other issues for that ministry, and typically has a board where members from the ministry play key roles. An integral part of the large process of mergers of universities, which was put on track by the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation in 2006, consisted in merging the large number of government research institutes into the existing regular universities. According to the union representatives of academic workers, this entailed a risk of blurring the distinction between autonomous research and commissioned research (*FORSKERforum*, 2006 (theme on university vs. sector research); *FORSKERforum* 2007b:. 4–5; *Magisterbladet* 2007).

and fit to collaborate with external stakeholders was sustained by the academic subjects we interviewed there.

This positive discursive rhetoric about the space for manoeuvre for the centre and its subjects did not mean that demands in the form of political technologies, such as performance indicators, seemed less prevalent than at the other department mentioned. The centre had success criteria that its academic subjects must comply with, which included publishing a certain number of internationally peer-reviewed articles each year, public visibility, etc. Nonetheless, the rhetoric and, maybe, the attitudes towards the more business-like way of conceiving of the university and the academic subject appeared very different. The centre manager stated in a rather affirmative way that the increased demand for public institutions within the last 5 years to document their results and the value of their activities was not particular to this institution; it applied to public employees almost everywhere. Phrased within the scope of the floating signifier of 'flexibility', he added: 'The centre is very flexible as to where an academic worker performs, as long as he performs well'. This resonated well with a professor in charge of research at the same centre, who supported a similar attitude but with a more elitist and *Humboldtian* kind of wording, namely that research is an elite endeavour that is not a 9–5 job, and should consequently comply – as it does – with high external demands for quality. Being in agreement on performance at a general level, there nonetheless appeared to be a noteworthy discrepancy between the manager's more business-like discourse and the professor's discourse on high quality standards. The professor in charge of research expressed his worry that increased demands for external funding might constitute a threat to research autonomy, as externally funded research required co-funding and this tended to swallow up the university's means for free research (*FORSKERforum* 2007a). Even this professor was very result-oriented in a business-like way though, when he stressed that it was important for the department's academic subjects to pay careful attention to the dynamics of the current regime and its tougher demands for securing external funding. In an elitist jargon he added: 'If you hired the right researchers, they will also find their way to the funding and get it!' (Professor, life sciences, mono-faculty specialist university, 2005).

Taking a closer look at the centre's Action plan, the most explicit document listing the political technologies governing the centre, it was very obvious that high performance was demanded among other things in the long array of explicit milestones. The centre benchmarked itself against renowned international counterparts in order to increase performance. The business-like approach that permeated the life of the centre was stressed by the secretary, who mentioned explicitly several times during a visit that we were welcome to hire their conference room in case we needed it for conferences or the like. The centre operated a political technology that conceptualised academic subjects' workloads in meticulous detail. Each year's work was 1680 h and academic staff had to administer themselves to fill these hours with commissioned research, teaching, etc. – a feature that governmentality studies has documented as a keystone in modern governance (Dean 1999; Rose 1999). Typically, the academic subjects had to fill out worksheets on a day-to-day basis and enter them into the electronic system on a monthly basis. The management kept track of

individual academic subjects and their different categories of work in percentages of their total. This was commented on by the centre manager in an ironic manner: 'They cannot do it in terms of hours as most researchers work well beyond the 37½ hours a week' (Centre manager, life sciences, mono-faculty specialist university, 2005). According to a low-ranking academic subject, a PhD student and project employee, this plotting in of time had to be done according to the project numbers available. According to her, this had the advantage that academic subjects' work became visible and easy to document, but the disadvantage that there was always some 10–20% of the work that was hard to plot in, as it did not seem to fit any of the project numbers.

Somehow, the objective space for manoeuvre at the two departments researched at this university, in terms of political technologies and other demands applied, did not seem that different from each other. Discursively, however, they represented rather different environments for thinking about the core of academic work and its purpose. The department of science related to food appeared to have been led into an efficiency regime that was – in many ways – perceived by its academic subjects to be detrimental to a good research climate, whereas at the centre in the other department, the new regime was perceived as being rather consistent with the demands they had been subjected to – and subjected themselves to – for years as a government research institute.

Maybe the previously mentioned PhD student and project employee at the centre hit a key difference between the department and the centre, which signified a key difference between 'the democratic and *Humboldtian* discourse' and 'the knowledge economy discourse', when she evoked the floating signifiers of 'democracy' and 'efficiency' and made them into a dichotomy:

> At the centre, we are probably more worried about efficiency and flexibility being hampered; in case that resulted in less flexibility and more talk [which she associates with the democracy discourse at the traditional university]' (PhD-student/Project employee, life sciences, mono-faculty specialist university, 2005).

As an indicator of the fast pace of university reform and of the changing conditions for being an academic subject, this mono-faculty specialist university was merged into a large, old multi-faculty university in 2006 with the status of a faculty for the time being. This merged faculty represented areas that were highly esteemed by the business, technology and innovation orientated government that espoused the knowledge-economy discourse, which was so dominant in these years. The rhetoric, as well as the political technologies and the rigour with which the knowledge-economy discourse and associated practices had been implemented at the previous mono-faculty specialist university, seemed very distant from the universe of the earlier mentioned humanities department at the traditional multi-faculty university. The merger of this small university that was oriented towards business, technology and innovation into the traditional larger university points to the friction that would grow internally at universities between the receding democratic and *Humboldtian* discourse and the emerging knowledge economy discourse.

9.5 The Reform University Battered by Reform

At *the reform university* (see footnote 1), I observed a third kind of university context in an institution that was established in the early 1970s in the wake of the triumph of the democratic and *Humboldtian* university discourse. It established itself as a 'progressive' university with the particular brand of social technologies like cross-disciplinary studies, project work and group-organised studies. This university, after initially hailing itself as a socialist-oriented bastion for research for the people had become the darling of advanced creative business with its focus on project work and partnerships with public and private entrepreneurs. Here, I observed a third way of dealing with the demands of the knowledge economy discourse.

Both departments that I researched at this university were deeply influenced by floating signifiers like 'democracy' and 'participation'. This had made an impact on the constitution of very collectively orientated departments in terms of the democratic and *Humboldtian* university discourses. The increasingly visible knowledge economy discourse and the ensuing reform pressure were mainly experienced as negative processes – albeit to different extents. Consequently, the collective spirit at both departments led to a build-up of structures by the academic subjects to protect the existing departmental cultures and their influence in case of future attempts to dislodge them. They had strong departmental boards. And there was an expectation in both departments that future appointed heads of department would hear them and give them a substantial say. In case an appointed leader would not listen to them, they claimed to have parallel structures based on the existing strong informal culture that could potentially make life difficult for a non-cooperative head.

One department had a turbulent history that was embedded in its current structure. In spite of a ministry decision in 1975 that the reform university should not have a department of educational science, the academic staff instead reorganised themselves into what in 1986 became a vocational and adult education group, an independent research centre within the university, which developed the capacity to survive on external funding; i.e. it adapted to central elements of a knowledge-economy discourse long before this discourse came to dominate the university. This vocational and adult education group with a focus on education research survived as a substantial unit of about 27 full-time academic subjects and a secretariat and was finally established as a regular department in 2000. The vocational and adult education group had acquired the capacity to accumulate external funding and built up sufficient funds to enable them to sustain a considerable number of full time academic staff. This made it possible for the department to maintain a larger number of academic positions than it would otherwise have been entitled to. It also meant that they were under pressure to fund, to a large extent, their own positions. The very collective spirit in the department meant that there was a sustained will to help one another out. The pressure to perform for the collective unit seemed to be deeply felt among its members.

The department was highly self-reflexive, which was evident on their very comprehensive and informative website. At this department, academic subjects seemed

very self-confident and did not fear in 2005 and 2006 the expected onslaught of new political technologies, increasing demands to fund their own positions and having to deal more with external stakeholders. They had already done this for decades, albeit in different ways than the idea of entrepreneurship in the knowledge-economy discourse would point to. They did not doubt that they would be able to continue their work pretty much along the same lines as before. One of the key academic subjects at the department, a professor, summed up their strategy in the following way:

> The strategy has been to build up long-term and in mutually interconnected projects … We have had a high rate of investment in activities that have often been under-financed, i.e. by maintaining contacts with a variety of external stakeholders, by building networks, and by profiling ourselves in order to make it visible who we are and what we represent (Professor, humanities, reform university, 2005).

This quote illustrates how the individual academic subject's space for manoeuvre at this department had hitherto been bought at the price of a very labour-intensive strategy that thrived on each individual academic subject's commitment to the department's collective strategy: that all agreed to throw in whatever overtime work might be needed to accomplish strategies and projects; that academic subjects helped each other out; and that they agreed to some common frameworks regarding which research themes and theoretical frameworks were employed.

As mentioned, this department built up a parallel structure in order to survive and make their influence felt in case a new management would seek to impose non-acceptable demands upon them. The above-mentioned professor was highly aware, though, that the knowledge-economy discourse and its focus on intensifying productivity as well as more top-down management would bring with it a number of dangers to such a strategy:

> To the extent that we ask for or let top-down management take over, we will end up in a situation that, at best, leaves us with a more defensive status quo governance, where we can refer to what we are used to doing, i.e. an unproblematised reference to the cultural reproduction of the department … The second major undermining factor has been the long-term decreasing allotment of resources to universities … More power is delegated to the strong leader, which contributes to decreasing dynamics as academic workers' ownership of activities at the department is consequently lessened. This leads to a more employee-like mentality, where the retention of work becomes an important individual instrument for maintaining one's sense of fair working conditions (Professor, humanities, reform university, 2005).

This danger became imminent as this department was merged with another department and a new head of department was appointed by the rector within the new top-down hierarchy of the 2003 University Law.

Another case was a natural sciences department that was strongly engaged in the study, application and dissemination of mathematics and physics research in society and education. This natural sciences department was small enough for each of its two constituent sections to have a tightly knit disciplinary identity backed up by strong social coherence. The two groups had developed strong informal structures; they met separately on a weekly basis for a meal and socialising, and annually they met at the rural Swedish homestead of one of the academic subjects in order to develop strategies and socialise among themselves as well as with students. Through

participation in these social events, as well as the intimate interaction between students and staff in the everyday life of the department, students were socialised into this department and its particular culture.

This department was very collective in spirit, albeit in a more vulnerable way than the department with a focus on education research. This feeling of vulnerability was expressed lucidly by a long-time and central associate professor:

> From 1975–1978 [the reform university] was put under administration by a management that was externally appointed by the ministry … And when you are under external occupation, you are also motivated to build up contesting parallel structures, even in your leisure time … Today, however, it is very difficult to harmonise the variety of different cultures … people withdraw … Maybe what we need is an acute experience of being in a state of emergency (Associate professor, natural sciences, reform university, 2005).

This associate professor mentioned that his department was currently considering establishing such parallel structures: 'However, such parallel structures only function when they are unanimously adhered to, which again demands a certain amount of social pressure … When such parallel structures function, no management can ignore them'.

The department's academic subjects were worried about university reforms. They were aware that they were a small department with a relatively low number of students and externally funded projects. Academic subjects at the department feared a merger with another sciences department, which might jeopardise the well-liked culture of a smaller department with plenty of solidarity. During most of the reform period, it was believed that they could ward off a lot of the external pressure and, if necessary, put up a parallel structure that would secure good odds for keeping their old identity. This had proved problematic, however. Firstly, the introduction of the political technology of the bibliometric university research database, which should be compatible with the databases of other universities, required standardisation and individualisation of what counted as productivity. This was felt as a restriction of the room for manoeuvre by some, as part of the academic work they considered useful for the department and university did not fit into the database. Subsequently, the collective identity of the department was dealt what was considered a final blow by many with the sudden merger into a considerably bigger department and regrouping into more diverse disciplines.

The onslaught of the knowledge-economy discourse thus presented the reform university with fierce challenges. The collective spirit was challenged by a more individualistic and business-inspired mode of governance. The key signifiers of 'democratic organs', 'participation' and 'group work' were hard to fit into the new conditions. Even the signifier 'project work' met with serious challenges as the Bologna Process and standardised comparability among universities gained a stronger foothold. Referring to the floating signifiers of being a 'progressive' and 'participatory' university would become considerably harder to defend, as these signifiers were closely connected to the receding democratic and *Humboldtian* discourse, which altogether was the discourse that constituted the intellectual environment that – in the early 1970s – made possible the establishment of the reform university.

9.6   Conclusion

These three case studies demonstrate that there were considerable differences between the particular university contexts investigated and, as it has been shown, in the room for manoeuvre available to particular academic subjects. Consequently, it would be inaccurate to say that the knowledge-economy discourse and its associated signifiers and political technologies lead to uniformity and standardisation. Here, it is important to keep in mind the double meaning of the subject in the Foucauldian sense, i.e. being the subject of a particular regime of truth on the one hand, and, on the other, being the subject of one's actions in the sense that practices of freedom are always possible within and among discursive regimes that continuously confront each other. This is to say that recent reforms have certainly had considerable implications for academic subjects in the form of new dominant regimes, but it appears equally evident that the challenges the knowledge economy discourse posed to the above-mentioned university contexts led to different venues for response, i.e. various potentials for practices of freedom for academic subjects, albeit in highly different ways. Consequently, it would probably be a strategic and tactical blunder to disregard the significance of the particularities, inertia and powers of contestation that have been amassed over time at different universities, faculties and departments in terms of different cultures, traditions and styles.

The traditional humanities discipline at the large university thus represented one kind of context. It seemed to have allies in long-standing traditions of networking that went beyond departments, universities and nations. This appeared to inhibit the formation of strong departments in the sense of modern organisations. Simultaneously, such a department appeared to be under imminent danger of being unable to mount sufficient collective responses to the challenges of the knowledge-economy discourse. The raison d'être of the department appeared to be too much at odds with knowledge economy demands for immediate utility that were convertible into patents, technological gadgets, etc.

At the other end of the spectrum, departments of health, food, medicine and the like seemed to be better able to respond to such demands of utility. They seemed to be in for better times as far as funding and expansion were concerned, by matching the demands from policy makers to secure in measurable terms the competitiveness of the Danish nation in a so-called global, competitive knowledge economy. Furthermore, the departments at the mono-faculty specialist university seemed easier to fit into a unitary organisational design, which could be standardised and made comparable across departments and universities through benchmarking and similar measures. This, however, did not mean that academic subjects here did not feel the yoke of performance indicators, albeit this was perceived differently at different departments.

Reform universities were born from the democratic and *Humboldtian* university discourse and seemed to face particular predicaments in adapting their old profiles to new times and new demands of the knowledge economy discourse. Arguably they were among the best suited to work closely with surrounding society and produce

'useful' research and graduates, but their previously dominant floating signifiers had to be adapted to and/or exchanged with new signifiers that were compatible with new demands in the form of new governance structures and new political technologies. As shown with the example of the department with a focus on educational research at the reform university, this was not necessarily an insurmountable task as this kind of university was permeated by strong values of producing relevant research and being responsive to the interests of external stake-holders. It remained to be seen whether business values would take over excessively or a balance could be struck with remaining values that satisfied more interests at the reform universities. It should not be forgotten that these universities had been lauded by stakeholders from which excessive admiration was hardly to be expected, such as the advanced hi-tech business life and the OECD.

It seems apt to close this chapter with the opening definition of power that Foucault stated in *The Will to Knowledge,* 'power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is a name that one attributes to a complex strategic situation in a particular society' (Foucault 1978; Chap. 4). In relation to university reform and the status of academic subjects, this 'complex strategic situation' comes about when a diversity of forces and counter-forces interact and make possible the social processes that shape the fabric of a given society.

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