



Digitalization as a Strategic Goal—The Missed Potential of Profiling Danish Universities in the Digitalization Era?

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INTRODUCTION

Digitalization has been on the political agenda in the Nordic countries for years, and due to the Covid-19 pandemic the focus on digitalization of (higher) education has increased concurrently with the national lockdowns. However, even before the pandemic forced HEIs to adopt digital solutions to an unseen degree, digitalization was a significant and powerful policy idea and previous studies have indicated that particularly Denmark has—even before the Covid-19 pandemic—had a very high uptake of ICT-solutions, even higher than e.g. Norway, which is also normally seen as very digitally advanced (Tømte et al., 2019). This also indicates what literature on digitalization of higher education has shown for years: that digitalization—long before the acute drive of the

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pandemic—has been seen as a necessary component in enhancing quality in higher education, e.g. by fostering new pedagogical opportunities for engaging students (Henderson et al., 2017), by offering technological infrastructures, or by enhancing internationalization of education (O'Connor, 2014).

But at the same time as these digital transformations have been reshaping the way that we think about higher education, the higher education systems and institutions have also been reshaped. Over the past decades, the pressures on universities have become increasingly intense, and change has become the order of the day for higher education institutions. The increasing competition for funding, the increasing student numbers, and demands for internationalization are just a few of these pressures, and at the same time governance reforms have swept the national higher education systems, transforming universities into self-governing entities, with substantial institutional autonomy to change structures and processes to accommodate the rising pressures (Amaral et al., 2013; de Boer & File, 2009). This rise of autonomy of universities has led to significant institutional transformations, e.g. in the form of mergers (Pinheiro et al., 2016), increased managerialism (Deem & Brehony, 2005) and professionalization of the organizations (Krücken & Meier, 2006). This is not least the case in Denmark, where the amount and extent of reforms have been notable, also compared to the other Nordic countries. Since the turn of the millennium, Danish universities have been reformed and reshaped continuously, both regarding the relationship with the state, the institutional size, the funding structure, their autonomy in relation to educational provision (e.g. the right to decide which and how many study places to offer) and their overall institutional autonomy and leadership (Aagaard et al., 2016; Aagaard & Mejlgard, 2012; Degn & Sørensen, 2015). Together, these transformations have over a relatively short period of time markedly increased the competition between institutions (and across the sector), for both research funding and students, and strengthened the strategic capacity of the institutions, e.g. by implementing self-ownership and professionalizing management structures.

When reviewing these parallel transformations—the digital and the institutional—it seems obvious to ask whether they are connected, e.g. whether the universities are exploiting their increased autonomy and strategic capacity to harness the power of the digitalization idea to strategically profile themselves in an increasingly competitive market of higher

education? As mentioned, digitalization has for years been seen as a vital component in—or vehicle for—enhancing the student experience, and might therefore be seen as an obvious profiling tool for universities wishing to attract potential students. At the same time, digitalization is also a very powerful policy idea, which has been on the political agenda in the Nordics for years. Digitalization might therefore also be used by universities to gain or maintain legitimacy and to demonstrate responsiveness towards policy drives and technological innovations. On the other hand, an abundance of studies has demonstrated how universities, generally, are fairly resistant to change and that institutional pressures are often more influential than competitive pressures (Mampaey et al., 2015). As demonstrated recently by Buss and Haase (Haase & Buus, 2020) Danish universities do, to some extent have strategies in relation to digitalization, but these institutional strategies are somewhat fragmented and do not seem to connect the motivation, the means, and the end of digitalization (Haase & Buus, 2020).

In the present chapter, the aim is to expand on the analysis performed by Buus and Haase and add the notions of strategy and autonomy to this. I wish to explore how/if universities use the idea of digitalization as a profiling measure. Where Buus and Haase examined institutional strategies, I focus on contracts and how digitalization emerges in these contracts, to highlight how/if universities make binding commitments to digitalization. Most studies of digitalization in higher education have focused on digitalization as top-down processes—influenced by international agendas or government policies, or as bottom-up initiatives, driven forward by dedicated individuals (Tømte et al., 2019). In this paper, however, the aim is not to look at the implementation of digitalization to search for effect, nor to explore digitalization initiatives, but to explore if and how the idea of digitalization is used strategically by HEIs and discuss implications and possibilities in relation to strategic management.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to make sense of digitalization as a policy idea that is able to move from context to context, the article uses a theoretical lens which focuses the gaze on policy ideas and how they are translated in local contexts.

The central theoretical concept in this chapter, thereby, is the one of policy ideas. Intuitively, most people would argue that *an idea* is a plan

aimed at solving a specific problem or a specific way of viewing the world, for instance when speaking of political ideas. And actually, this common sense perception of the concept is not too far from the theoretical understanding within the framework laid out in this article, where ideas are seen as *normative and causal beliefs, working within a dynamic network of other ideas, establishing goals and means by which these goals can legitimately be obtained*. In other words, ideas are the fabric of institutions and thereby the filter through which we see ourselves and our surroundings.

This perception of ideas stems from a strand of literature which does not necessarily form a coherent and comprehensive theoretical framework, but is better understood as an amalgamation of many different perspectives, whose overriding common characteristics is a basis in *institutional theory* and an emphasis on *ideas* as having intrinsic importance in policymaking and political action (Degn, 2015). The perspective distinguishes itself by its insistence that ideas are more than mere smoke-screens for material interests as claimed by scholars of rational choice (Mehta, 2010), more than reflections of path-dependent norms as they are portrayed in historical and sociological institutionalism (Campbell, 1998), and is therefore deemed useful in an exploration of how policy ideas enter into new contexts and how they lend themselves to local translation and reformulation.

The basic premise is that no idea can enter a new context unchanged, and on the other hand that no system can remain the same when a new idea is inserted—every idea will be translated and given meaning in light of the context, which changes both idea and context. To grasp this process, we turn to the concept of translation, understood at the process through which policy ideas are reshaped and rearticulated in local contexts, e.g. in organizations trying to implement a notion of digitalization. Translation scholars have mainly been concerned with exploring and understanding how ideas, and more specifically policy ideas, e.g. about efficiency or accountability, move across time and space, and how this traveling process affects both the idea and the context it enters into (Czarniawska & Joerges, 2011; Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008). The main focus thus is how “*ideas are translated into objects (models, books, transparencies), are sent to other places than those where they emerged, translated into new kind of objects, and then sometimes into actions*” (Czarniawska, 2009).

The important distinguishing feature of both the ideational and the translation perspective is that they distance themselves from rational explanations to policy change and implementation and put the actor back

onto the playing field. Structures do not translate—actors do. These actors may be influenced by the structures and institutions, that they are surrounded by and engulfed in, but by way of their translations and transformations, they also change these surroundings, thus engaging and enacting a dynamic environment. The translation process, in other words, transforms both the idea that is translated and the context within which it is translated. This means that translation processes are influenced by the translating actors' environment, e.g. the regulator, normative, and cognitive institutions that comprise an organization or national policy environment of a government, but at the same time has the potential to destabilize these very institutions and infuse them with new meaning and potentially new actions.

POLICY IDEAS IN DANISH HIGHER EDUCATION

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, in the Danish context, the pervasiveness of policy ideas is apparent. In this way, Denmark is an interesting case, when looking at policy ideas, as several scholars have pointed out that the willingness and speed in turning international ideas into national policy is quite exceptional (Pinheiro & Stensaker, 2014).

In earlier work (Degn, 2015), it was demonstrated that in the area of higher education and research policy, powerful ideas of e.g. strategy, accountability, and democracy have been instrumental in shaping the path of policy development since the late 1960s. As demonstrated in that study, these ideas have woven together over time, lending meaning to each other and influenced the translation of new ideas at the national policy level. One key finding, however, was that traditional, and highly institutionalized ideas: “*seems to influence the translation in a stabilizing manner*”, making it difficult for radical ideas to become dominant.

The study, however, also demonstrated how more fundamental shift can be detected over time, e.g. when looking at how the perception and political articulation of the role and purpose of the university has:

moved from being influenced by ideas highlighting the institutional characteristics of HEIs to more instrumental and external constructions — on both the problem definition and policy solution levels. This movement becomes clear when looking at how the translations go from defining the ‘problem of higher education’ as a negative problem of internal structures, for example, that the governance and management structures are obsolete, undemocratic

(1970s), or inefficient (1980s), to defining them increasingly as positive problems or problems of potential, such as the need for modernization (1990s) and responsiveness (2000s). (Degn, 2015)

This analysis, however, left off, where the present study begins, namely with the Danish University Act of 2003. And as mentioned, the past two decades have been characterized by intense reforms, influenced by a number of both new and traditional policy ideas.

Digitalization is one of these ideas, but one which is often overlooked in policy analyses. As noted in (Tømte et al., 2019), the use of ICT in higher education was promoted by the Danish government as early as 2007, and was made an explicit political goal. This was particularly directed at the educational and administrative side of higher education institutions (Regeringen III, 2007). At national level this emphasis was expanded, and in 2015 digitalization became a mandatory point in the university development contracts in 2015 (Tømte et al., 2019). It thereby becomes interesting to look at how digitalization was translated by individual higher education institutions, both before and after the mandate in 2015.

RESEARCH DESIGN

As described above, the translation process transforms both the idea that is translated, as well as the context within which it is translated. The research design thus reflects an attempt to investigate what happens to both the context within which something is translated, and the notion/idea; the “something” that is the object of translation.

To explore this, I have chosen to focus on how universities choose to translate “digitalization” into contracts between themselves and the Ministry of Higher Education and Science, namely the strategic contracts between the Ministry of Higher Education and Science and the individual HEI, constituting the central governance documents of Danish higher education institutions.

These so-called “development contracts”¹ were implemented in the wake of the university reform in 2003, as the formal steering instrument, regulating the relation between the Ministry and the individual HEI. The

¹ Later called “Strategic Framework Contracts”.

university reform had increased the autonomy of the HEIs quite substantially, but the development contracts were then implemented to ensure the accountability of the HEIs and a degree of central control of the Ministry. The development contracts are renewed every 4–5 years and stipulate the main performance goals of the HEI, as well as key performance indicators. These performance goals and indicators are set by the institutions themselves (and approved by the Ministry), and the development contracts can thereby be seen as institutional translations of policies, but also as opportunities to promote institutional strengths and priorities in a more binding way than is the case in strategies and mission statements. They are in this sense different from such strategies and mission statements, in that they stipulate targets and priorities that the institutions commit to—rather than the more non-binding statements often seen in other types of branding documents.

DATA AND ANALYTICAL APPROACH

The empirical focus in this chapter is the Danish case, and within that I have chosen to focus on three different HEIs, namely Aarhus University (AU), Aalborg University (AAU), and the Technical University of Denmark (DTU). The three institutions have been chosen because they represent three very different organizational/institutional contexts, i.e. a traditional, comprehensive university (AU), a newer, regional and interdisciplinary university (AAU), and a very old, monodisciplinary technical university (DTU). These different institutional profiles are interesting translation “arenas”, because we might expect them to have different strategic agendas etc., which would prompt differing translations and strategic uses of digitalization as a policy idea.

The development contracts from the three universities were retrieved from the website of the Ministry of Higher Education and Science (www.ufm.dk), where all development contracts are freely available. The content of the development contracts was then coded by the author, initially focused on identifying paragraphs relating to digitalization, digital transformation, or ICT. Once these were identified and coded, a second-order coding was conducted, focusing on grouping statements according to theme, resulting in the four analytical themes that will be unfolded in the analysis. The themes are thus empirically derived and not theoretical constructs. In the following sections, the themes are understood as “patterns of translation”, cf. the theoretical framework of the study.

FINDINGS

As mentioned previously in this chapter, digitalization as a policy idea can be seen in Denmark as early as 2007 and digitalization was introduced as a mandatory goal in the development contracts in 2015. An initial question, is thereby when digitalization emerges in the development contracts of the selected universities; with the political mandate in 2015 or before?

Interestingly, albeit not surprisingly, there are only very few references to digitalization before 2015 in the development contracts, and the only references are in the contracts from Aarhus University, who in 2011 described an ambition to:

*focus on the development of a joint policy for educational IT; that is a policy for the development and integration of educational- and learning oriented IT in education.*² (Aarhus University, 2011)

Additionally, there is an earlier reference to a commitment to establishing new study places within ICT, to “*address the need of the labor market to strengthen the competences in people with short-term education*” (Aarhus University, 2006). This seems, however, to be unrelated to the policy idea of digitalization.

This lack of attention to the issue of digitalization as a policy idea or indeed as a strategic opportunity, suggests a predominantly reactive strategy by the Danish universities. But how has this reaction then played out? In the following sections, I will present an analysis of the translations of digitalization as they emerge in the development contracts after 2015.

TRANSLATIONS OF DIGITALIZATION

Overall, it becomes apparent that there are four overall themes in how the universities address digitalization or digital transformation through their development contracts. These patterns can be summarized as: digitalization in/of education, digitalization in/of research, digitalization in/organization, and digitalization as a societal condition. Each of these themes will be unfolded in the following sections and subsequently discussed in relation to the theoretical framework.

² All quotes are translated from Danish by the author.

DIGITALIZATION IN/OF EDUCATION

The majority of references to digitalization in the development contracts refers to issues of education. Within these references to digitalization or digital transformation most of them concern the development of E-learning platforms or Learning Management Systems. These E-learning platforms are initially framed partly as “efficiency tools”:

A better utilization of the digital learning space will ensure a more efficient use of the teachers' and students' time, as well as accommodate the diversity of the students. (Aarhus University, 2015)

In other words, focus is, in the initial references to E-learning platforms, on their potential for making educational provision more efficient and more aligned to the various needs of a diverse student population. The same attention to the diverse student population is visible in the AAU development contract from the 2015–2018 period where it is stated that:

The intention is to secure a structure and a culture, which supports that an educational programme at Aalborg University is a full-time programme and that the educations at Aalborg University remains at a high standard with formats that are adapted to the students' learning needs and interests, as well as to society's demands for bachelors and masters students. (Aalborg University, 2015)

At the same time (in the DTU case) or as a natural continuation of the initial steps (in the AAU and AU case), educational IT is also linked to enhancing quality in education. This is in the first references (from 2015 + 2018) primarily linked to peer-learning:

Furthermore, the students can engage in mutual evaluation of each other's work and/or get immediate feedback through computer-assessed assignments, which will give them insight into their own academic strengths and weaknesses. The experiences from the university and in general show that the students obtain a better learning outcome and that e-learning in this way can be used as a strategic tool in enhancing the quality of DTU educations. (Technical University Denmark, 2015)

There is to some extent a focus on “utilization” and thereby seeing digitalization as an opportunity to e.g. increase the motivation of students,

support learning processes and increase study intensity (Aalborg University, 2018).

In the later references, feedback and the “utility focus” is replaced by (or supplemented with) focus on enhancing students’ digital competencies—thereby moving from educational IT as a tool to enhance learning, to digital competences as a goal in itself:

DTU will in the future focus on the application and development of new digital learning tools and methods, which will facilitate new pedagogical approaches – like e.g. personally adjusted adaptive learning – and which will enhance digital competencies in the DTU graduates. (Technical University Denmark, 2018)

In general, a somewhat homogenous framing of digitalization in and of education emerges in the development contracts. With few variations, we see similar patterns in the translations across institutions, focusing on the opportunities of digital transformation in relation to enhancing quality primarily through feedback, and through strengthening digital competencies. The universities become more ambitious over time, but in general follow similar paths, which indicates that the digitalization idea is not used as a strategic positioning tool in relation to education.

DIGITALIZATION IN/OF RESEARCH

A second theme which emerges in the development contracts is a focus on digitalization as a research topic, or digitalization in relation to research practices. The latter is the least predominant theme, only mentioned in the latest development contract from DTU, where it is stated that the university will work to:

strengthen digitalization in research and at the same time create more visibility. (Technical University Denmark, 2022)

However, it is somewhat underspecified what exactly is entailed in this particular goal. The former theme, however: digitalization as a research topic, is more frequently mentioned as a strategic goal, at least at DTU and AAU. Interestingly, digitalization as a research topic is not mentioned in the AU development contracts.

AAU and DTU, however, both specify digitalization as a strategic research area in their development contracts, albeit with slightly differing emphasis depending on their institutional profile. AAU, being an institution with a very strong and unique base in Problem-Based Learning, states that they will begin a large cross-disciplinary research project, involving the PBL-researchers at the university, with the aim of:

... form the research based knowledge base for the development of the digital support of learning in AAU educations and transform this to practice in the learning environments. (Aalborg University, 2018)

The university thereby links the strategic goal of digitalization in research to the goal of digitalization in education and to their institutional profile.

DTU has also, in their two most recent development contracts, had a focus on digitalization as a research topic. In the 2018 contract, digitalization was specified as one of three main research topics that the institution would focus on in the contract period, alongside *life science* and *energy*. In the subsequent development contract, this strategic goal was specified further to concern how digital solutions enhance the quality of life, by specifying an ambition that:

...in the future, research should be conducted e.g. on how digital technologies contribute to creating a better life for the individual and a sustainable future for all, by using big data, artificial intelligence and Internet of Things solutions. (Technical University Denmark, 2018)

Again it becomes apparent how the institution uses the idea of digitalization to profile themselves along the existing profile areas, just as we saw in the case of AAU and PBL.

DIGITALIZATION IN/OF ORGANIZATION

A third, albeit very small, theme is one of digitalization in/of organization, which refers to mentions of digital solutions to enhance organizational functions, etc., or the organizational dimension of digitalization. This theme overlaps somewhat with the references to E-learning platforms, digital exams, and other themes that were categorized as digitalization in education. However, there are also a few sporadic mentions of interdisciplinarity as a prerequisite of digitalization, and the need to

organize collaboration between faculties in order to be able to address digitalization as a societal challenge, e.g. in the quote below:

There needs to be more collaboration across the breadth of the university, in order to contribute to the solution of societal challenges to a higher degree. The ongoing digital transformation of society is a particular focus area and the university contributes to this through a strengthening of the IT-disciplines, but many of the academic areas of the university will play a vital role in exploiting the possibilities of the digital transformation and not least contributing with solutions to the challenges that comes with it, together. The university also sees good opportunities to create collaborations across fields. (Aarhus University, 2018)

Digitalization here becomes more of a lever to further other agendas, e.g. the intra-organizational collaboration across disciplines, etc.

DIGITALIZATION AS A SOCIETAL CONDITION

The final theme is one of digitalization as a societal condition. In other words, this theme relates to mentions of digitalization, not as a priority or strategic goal, but as a condition that the university needs to address. These references emerge in all three institutions, mainly in the latest development contracts. One example of this is in the quote below, where we see that digitalization is mentioned as a societal challenge along the same lines as the aging population, international migration etc.

In research policy and in ongoing research programmes nationally and internationally, cross-disciplinarity is highlighted and supported as a pre-requisite in order to tackle important societal challenges, such as international migration, the aging population, digitalization of our society, the scarcity of resources and green transition. (Aalborg University, 2018)

Here we see, again, how digitalization—this time as a societal condition—is used to further or leverage institutional priorities, in this case cross-disciplinarity. This is also visible in the quote below from AU, where digitalization as a condition is used to leverage a focus on humanities and the importance of “softer skills”:

As a consequence of the pervasive digitalization and globalization and the rapid changes this will cause, the world of business will increasingly need to

draw more extensively on competences within cultural comprehension, ethics, relations between people and between man and machine. (Aarhus University, 2018)

However, in the references to digitalization as a condition, there is also a recognition that digitalization is more than a lever that can be used to further strategic goals; it is described as a profound reshuffling of society which is:

.. radically changing the way we work, live, communicate, collaborate and teach. AAU needs to be on the forefront of the digital development, so the technological opportunities are utilized to create even better quality in education. (Aalborg University, 2018)

In this quote we see how the general digitalization of society—beyond higher education—is seen as a condition which frames the strategic opportunities that the university has. A similar construction can be seen in the quote below from DTU, where the digitalization of society is also mentioned as a condition that frames the actions of universities:

The technological and digital development has changed the labour market in a range of fields. This development will only continue and accelerate. To be able to utilize the new technological opportunities there is a need for new competences and skills in the workforce, which changes the demands for educations and educational institutions. (Technical University Denmark, 2018)

The emergence of this final theme in the development contracts could be interpreted as an attempt to react and acknowledge the existence or prominence of the policy idea and use it as a basis for strategic initiatives. Both of the quotes above refer to a general digitalization of society as something that frames action, e.g. that the digitized labour market required more digitally competent graduates, which in turn necessitates a stronger effort towards this from higher education institutions. The theme is thereby related to the other themes, but still underlines that the universities highlight external circumstances as drivers for a development towards digitalization, rather than a pro-active, strategic decision made by themselves. This fits well with the overall impression that the universities are using a reactive strategy to digitalization rather than a proactive one.

DISCUSSION

As mentioned in the introductory sections of this chapter, existing literature on higher education institutions, their branding, and strategic capacity might lead to differing expectations to their behavior in the face of digitalization drives. Based on institutional theory, many studies have pointed to the change-resistant and highly institutionalized nature of universities (Brunsson & Olsen, 1993; Meyer & Rowan, 1977); emphasizing how institutional pressures e.g. for isomorphism, outweighs external pressures for strategic profiling (Mampaey et al., 2015). However, there are also studies pointing to how the increased institutional autonomy and “marketization” of higher education have led universities to “brand” themselves in various ways (Celly & Knepper, 2010; Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009), e.g. based on rankings (Brankovic, 2018), or other types of profiling elements. Following this, it is easy to imagine how digitalization, e.g. of education, could be used as such a profiling element, to attract students. To explore these contradicting explanations/expectations, I have explored how Danish universities have used and described digitalization in their development contracts. The choice to look at development contracts is that these document represent binding contracts and indicators that the universities commit to follow, rather than e.g. strategic documents, which are non-binding and to some extent may also be seen as more symbolic.

As the analysis above has shown, digitalization plays a fairly minor role in the strategic development contracts of the three chosen Danish universities. Given the attention given globally, as well as nationally, to the idea of digitalization in the realm of higher education and research,—and the fact that it was put forward by the Ministry in 2015 as a mandatory focus area, this lack of emphasis might be somewhat surprising, but at the same time also perhaps illustrates the above-mentioned notion of the change-resistant universities. Underlining this point, the analysis in this chapter has demonstrated that the universities studied here have taken a more reactive approach to the idea of digitalization and addressed the idea when prompted to by the ministry.

However, despite the somewhat reactive strategy, digitalization is taken on in the development contracts, and in the analysis, I have identified four “patterns of translation” that shape the way that the universities give meaning to the idea of digitalization and thereby also transform and adapt that same idea. The four translation patterns are digitalization

in/of: education, research, organization, and digitalization as a societal condition. The substance of these translation narratives is detailed above in the analysis, but a point which seems worthy of additional discussion is how two additional patterns emerge within the narratives.

Firstly, it seems that the translations oscillate between two framings of the idea; namely digitalization as a tool and digitalization as a goal. This is particularly visible in the digitalization in/of education narrative, where it also seems like digitalization as a tool is the most prevalent translation. This means that digitalization is often described as a means towards an end, often education quality or efficiency (e.g. increasing the students' motivation or decreasing overall study time). In the digitalization in/of research, the reverse construction is more prevalent, namely digitalization as a goal in itself. In this theme, descriptions of digitalization as a research theme are visible, particularly in two of the universities. This is interesting, as it is one of the few instances where differences between the institutions are visible. The two institutions that mention digitalization as a goal in relation to research are DTU and AAU, both institutions which have a more distinct profile to begin with—one a technical university and the other focusing on a specific educational model. The interpretation of this difference could be that it is easier to link the digitalization idea to these profiles, than to a comprehensive profile as AU has. Digitalization is thereby used to further strengthen existing profile areas (PBL or big data/AI).

Secondly, another pattern is the distinction between digitalization as a challenge vs. digitalization as a lever. These constructions are mostly visible in the (less frequent) narratives of digitalization as a societal condition and digitalization in/of organization. Here we see a continuum emerging, where at one end we have references to digitalization as something which is “changing the world”, i.e. a type of obstacle, and on the other end references to digitalization as a lever: as something which demands specific things/competences, that the institutions are already offering or plan to offer in the future.

Particularly this last category is where we see signs of strategic translations of a policy idea; the universities using digitalization in a strategic manner to further particular areas, to highlight existing strengths or institutional profiles. However, as also seen this is a very small collection of references, which seems to indicate that universities are not utilizing this potential strategic opportunity to a very significant extent.

A final point worth mentioning, is that while digitalization is mentioned in the development contracts, it is rarely as specific objectives or in the form of indicators. Very few concrete targets for digitalization are mentioned in the development contracts, and the idea thereby mainly emerges as qualitative descriptions of goals and conditions rather than specific, measurable, and binding targets. While many academics and scholars studying higher education institutions are fairly critical of the “metrification” and contractualization of higher education and research, one might also argue that by leveraging an existing steering instrument, such as the development contracts, to further strategic goals of e.g. digitalization of education, the universities could use such contractualization and metrification for their own advantage. The present study, however, indicates that the universities are not (yet)—at least in this area—utilizing their agency and autonomy to a very high degree.

CONCLUDING REMARKS—DIGITALIZATION AS A MISSED STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITY?

In the introduction to this chapter, I stated that an aim was to discuss how translations of digitalization as a policy idea are—or could be—used strategically by universities in Denmark. The analysis has shown that the universities, when it comes to digitalization, seem to be more reactive than proactive in their translation of digitalization. In other words, they do react to a policy drive by addressing digitalization, when they must, and this reaction may to some extent be seen as strategic, particularly when used as a lever to further existing strategic areas or institutional profiles. As pointed out in the introduction to this chapter, previous studies have demonstrated that most digitalization initiatives are results of political (or other types of external) pressure, or individual/departmental projects, driven forward by personal interest or ambition (Stensaker et al., 2007; Tømte et al., 2019), and that overall, cohesive, institutional strategies for digitalization are scarce in higher education institutions.

An indeed, the present study also indicates that strategic use of digitalization as a policy idea does not seem to be—or have been—high on the agenda for Danish universities. This might be perceived as something of a missed opportunity for the universities, as there are no indications of institutions being pro-active in any real sense, utilizing the momentum to positions themselves in the national landscape or indeed on the international stage. Digitalization seems to be perceived as less “potent”

in relation to positioning, despite the overall political attention to the idea. The empirical material applied in the present chapter can naturally be argued to only present a fragment of the overall strategic line of the universities, but they are nonetheless the key steering element—and communication channel—between state and institution. If the universities wished to make a strategic stance in profiling themselves, these contracts would be an obvious arena, but it seems that this arena as of now has been left unused, at least in relation to this. Further studies of this, however, would be valuable as it would also illuminate how strategic management in a highly institutionalized field plays out, and which arenas are indeed used in the “positioning game”.

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