

Working Papers on University Reform

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Histories of RUC

- Roskilde University Centre

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This working paper series is published by the research unit "Transformations of universities and organizations" at the Department of Educational Anthropology at the Danish University of Education. The series brings together work in progress in Denmark and among an international network of scholars involved in research on universities and higher education.

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Histories of RUC - Roskilde University Centre

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Introduction

Roskilde University Centre (RUC) was established in 1972 as a reform university, following years of protests and debates about Danish higher education.¹ RUC's early years were marked by conflicts about which, in subsequent years, various histories of the institution have been developed. My study concentrated on the issues that were important in the establishment of the university. The main issues were the external conditions, especially the relationship between the university and the Danish state, and the self-perception amongst students, staff and the "official" university. In particular, I ask what were the common interpretations of the structure of study programmes, their aims, and the relations between education and research? I studied RUC's history up to 1997 and since then I have not followed the situation at RUC.

Background: Debates on university reform from the 1950s

Student demonstrations in the seventies were no novelty. One example of an earlier demonstration was seen in February 1951. Students from the universities and the other schools of higher education in Denmark wanted the government to fund research and students. They succeeded and the Danish State's General Foundation for Research (*Statens Almindelige Videnskabsfond*) and Youth Study Foundation (*Ungdommens Uddannelsesfond*) were established. At that time Copenhagen University had fewer than 5,000 students, but according to the national paper *Berlingske Tidende* 7,000 persons took part in the demonstration. Another paper, *Politiken*, gave 10,000 as the number of participants.² In the front of the demonstration were to be found the head or *rektor* of Copenhagen University with several other rectors. At this time there were no conflicts between university rectors, professors and students. The Danish State's General Foundation for Research and the Youth Study Foundation became the first central state institutions for universities – alongside the ministry.

By the end of the 1950s, the cohesion between the students and the university rectors and professors was not so obvious any longer. Students were critical of many university traditions.³ Ten years later, when the new reform university in Roskilde was founded, the issues under discussion were still more or less identical to those in the late 1950s. The problems were:

¹ This paper was first presented at the Seminar Series, 'New Management, New Identities? Danish University Reform in an International Perspective' at the Danish University of Education, Copenhagen, on 26 October 2005.

² *Politiken* 1951, *Berlingske Tidende* 1951

³ Hansen 2005

- structure of the education programme, that is how many years should students spend on a programme and what should be the frequency of examinations?
- curriculum, primarily the size, but also the content
- roles of the students and the professors

In short, the proposals for changing universities in the late 1950s were as follows:

Structure of education programmes

Regarding the structure of education programmes it was proposed that a three year bachelor's degree be used in the fields of law and medicine, but that the humanities or the sciences should keep the five year candidate degree. Another proposal was that the first two years become more like school with fixed timetables. The students proposed better study guidance. The Commission on Technical Education (Teknikerkommissionen 1959) proposed a new structure for technical studies in order to make it possible to go from one study to another or to gain access to advanced studies by completing lower studies. The propositions were much like the modules developed in RUC in the 1970s.

Size of curriculum

As for the size of the curriculum it was simply like living in a small flat: when something new comes in, something old should go out was the proposal. And there were proposals that examinations should be smaller and more frequent.

Roles of students and professors

As for the roles of students and professors, the lectures (*forelæsninger*) were criticised for being "static", and professors were accused of being "soft tyrants", as some of them were very conservative in their views on what was right and what was wrong – as to the subjects of students' theses for example.

By the end of the 1950s, the new students liked to see themselves as grown ups and as independent citizens, rather than as students to be formed by the professors. The new student wanted shorter studies, more frequent examinations and a better introduction to their studies. They expressed a wish to be ready for professional life when they left university. But the responses from the professors showed devotion to university traditions, and they especially praised students' independent work. Only a few professors admitted that the growing size of the curriculum and the growing number of students had changed the conditions for the students' independent work dramatically.

In the late 1960s there was general agreement that the universities had to change profoundly. To put it a little rhetorically one could ask if the events of 1968 represented a student rebellion? Or was it a breakdown of the traditional university? As the following quote demonstrates, to change universities in the late 1960s was not an exclusively left wing agenda, but it was a subject with supporters from different political standpoints.

"... stiffness, traditions, and almost insurmountable, narrow boundaries between disciplines must belong to the past and must be broken down, the sooner the better ...

On this background our party is very eager that the idea of the university centre be developed and forms the background for further work."

"... stivhed, traditionsbundethed og næsten uoverstigeligt snævre faggrænser må høre fortiden til og må nedbrydes jo før jo hellere... På hele denne baggrund er derfor også vort parti overordentlig ivrig for, at centertanken udbygges og danner baggrund for det videre arbejde."

(Erik Haunstrup Clemmensen, Conservative People's Party, member of parliament 1969)⁴

The number of students was growing rapidly. Copenhagen University had about 5,000 students in 1950, 10,000 in 1963 and 25,000 in 1971. New subdisciplines and new occupations had emerged. As society changed, the university met demands for new studies, for example concerning developing countries, societal planning, environmental subjects and new media. Curricula were growing in every subject.

The political focus on the universities became intensive. Why were the universities so expensive? Was the period of study too long? Did too many students jump from one direction of study to another? In short: could university studies be more effective? The themes of the late 1950s grew clearer in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Politicians and some elements within the universities themselves demanded changes and even wanted experiments on the key themes of the structure of courses, the curriculum, and the roles of students and professors.

Structure of study programmes and pedagogy at RUC

Roskilde University Centre, RUC, was established to give answers to such problems. The first students came to RUC in 1972. It was evident that the new university in Roskilde should not be a traditional university. Roskilde University Centre was meant to be an experiment.⁵

The most important novelties in the study programmes were:

⁴ Folketingstidende 1968/69

⁵ Hansen 1997a. Hansen 1997b

Basic Studies Programmes

Basic Studies Programmes (*basisuddannelser*) of two years. In the 1950s and the 1960s the introduction of a bachelor's degree in universities had been discussed, but the universities had been strongly opposed to this. As an alternative, the idea of Basic Studies Programmes emerged as a kind of pre-school for university, with the professors in the role of teachers for the new students. However, in the Basic Studies Programmes at RUC, young Marxist students had a huge influence on interdisciplinary and problem-oriented studies. Basic Studies Programmes must be seen as an answer to the problems concerning the difficult introduction to university, which had been mentioned already in the late fifties.

Specialised Programmes

Specialised Programmes (*overbygningssuddannelser*) of three years were to follow the Basic Studies Programmes. Each student should integrate two disciplines in the specialised programme. The specialised programme was divided into modules, each focusing on essential parts of the disciplines and each ending with an examination. These specialised programmes divided into modules were a response to the problem of the number of examinations.

Integration of short-cycle and long-cycle studies

This was a new phenomenon in the Danish education system. Until then, short-cycle studies such as for social workers and primary school teachers had had their own schools, completely separated from universities. In RUC, short-cycle specialised degrees of one and a half years were planned to lead to professional qualification as a social worker and a primary school teacher. Long-cycle specialised degrees of three years led to occupations such as upper secondary school teachers (*gymnasielærer*). The short-cycle students could engage in project work with the long-cycle students, but would complete fewer modules. The plan for a programme of study for primary school teachers was never executed, but was stopped by the liberal government in 1974. The idea of flexible studies suggested ten years earlier by the Commission on Technical Education was not mentioned.

Interdisciplinarity

Interdisciplinarity was a keyword in RUC, but the understanding of disciplines changed significantly over the years. In the 1970s, disciplines were seen as obstacles to interdisciplinarity. In the 1980s they became the necessary condition for interdisciplinarity.

Problem-oriented studies

Problems with the size of the curriculum were overcome by abandoning the idea of a curriculum altogether. It was replaced by problem-oriented studies. The main focus should not be on the curriculum, but on specific problems in order to overcome the boundaries of disciplines and fixed curricula.

Group work

The studies should be carried out within the framework of students' groups where the students themselves defined the leading questions or problems in their studies. Group work demanded comprehensive social skills from the students; some of those who did not have such skills had to give up their studies.

Participation

The new law on universities in 1970 (*Styrelsesloven* cf. Hansen 1971) had institutionalised students' participation in the governing bodies of the university, as well as the participation of the teachers who were not professors and the technical and administrative staff. This law applied to every university, but in RUC the group work along with the new law on universities meant major changes to the roles of students and teachers. The two groups of teachers and of students became equal in university matters as well as in questions of study and research.

Technocrats, academics and critical students

Diverse reasons for wanting to create a new experimental university were given. In general, three groups with different views can be distinguished: *Technocrats* (politicians and bureaucrats), *traditional academics*, and *critical teachers and students*.

Technocrats

The technocrats are mostly politicians from right wing parties and the Social Democrats. Their aim was to make the university an effective machinery. To them Basic Studies Programmes and Specialised Programmes, interdisciplinarity and problem-centred studies were the means to achieve flexibility. Research would not be restricted by traditional academic approaches, but had the possibility to adjust to other values, for example those of the market. Problems of students switching frequently from one degree programme to another – or leaving their studies unfinished – should be overcome when the final decision on what field to study and what degree to go for was postponed. As regards the students' group work, the technocrats noted that when students collaborated, that is to say they were teaching each other, the expenses for teachers would be lower. In pursuit of their aim of a more "effective" university, they had no veneration for university traditions. Traditions could be broken if it was felt necessary. I have chosen to give this perspective the ambiguous name of modernisation.

Traditional academics

What I call the traditional academics was a broad group, representing the traditional values of the university. Some were to be found in the group of teachers in the new university, others amongst the politicians. Also in the big group of supporters for the new university we find many traditional academics. For this group the new structure

provided the opportunity to introduce research-oriented teaching into studies that used to be not research-oriented, as was the case for the programmes for social workers and primary school teachers. They were in favour of the idea of student discussion groups, as this resembled old university traditions of a close relationship, and mutual inspiration, between student and teacher. Problem-centred interdisciplinary studies were welcomed as a challenge to research and many looked forward to finding new inspiration when new theoretical approaches - such as Marxism - were introduced. Those who saw the academic tradition as pluralistic, of course welcomed new theoretical approaches. They saw the new university as an opportunity to respect and renew old university values by giving greater opportunities for research and teaching development.

Critical teachers and students

The critical students and teachers were very critical of academic traditions; they studied Marx in different versions. The critical students and teachers found in the new structure a means of organising the university with fewer divisions between new students and older students, between students and professors, and, most importantly, between different fields of research, between the sciences, the social sciences and the humanities. They were quite sure that group work would promote collective consciousness amongst the students – and between students and teachers. Students' defining the leading questions in their studies characterized the problem-oriented approach, and the critical teachers and students benefited from this to complete Marxist studies. The students' work was not marked by external censors but in internal evaluations, as the whole process should be taken into consideration, not only the final result. Most students and many teachers wanted RUC to be a university where traditions were broken and where studies were conducted in the interests of the working class.

The planning of RUC was carried out during a short period of less than two years. In this limited span of time a remarkable alliance was made between these three groups. This was unique. For example no such alliance was evident in Sweden where already in the 1950s technocrats had reformed the universities.

RUC in 1970s and 1980s

RUC was considered a left-wing-university by many newspapers and non-socialist politicians. Indeed, this was true for some of the students and teachers. Others had an open mind towards different points of view and wanted to study Marxism as well as other theoretical approaches. Shortly after the opening of the new university in 1972 students and teachers had to take up a position in favour of or against Marxism, when the first rector, the social democrat, Erling Olsen, named the university in public, "a school of Marxist mission". As Marxism had become closely connected with the new pedagogy, including students' work in groups and problem oriented studies, this was

an easy choice for most of the students and teachers, who declared themselves in favour of studies in the interest of the working class. But not all supported this clear pro-Marxist stance and the broad alliance at RUC was broken. Bitter conflicts characterised discussions over the programmes of study in the new university. In particular the remarkable alliance between leftwing students and lecturers, other academics and technocrats collapsed. Technocrats and non-socialist politicians thought that RUC was dominated by Marxist theories and in 1974 this criticism meant that the government closed the course for primary school teachers before it even opened.

In the early 1970s there was no government body dealing with university management in general. The Danish State's General Foundation for Research only dealt with funding of research, and not with e.g. education programmes or the roles of students and professors. The Agency of Advanced Studies (*Direktoratet for videregående uddannelser*) was established as part of Ministry of Education in 1974. Until then university management was supposed to happen within the self-governing universities. Apparently this was possible in the old universities, but in the case of RUC the disagreements between different groups could in no way be integrated into the internal steering bodies. Instead, internal disagreements at RUC were several times conducted in public, in the newspapers and in parliamentary decisions.

For example, one of the criticisms of RUC was that academic standards were too low in the Basic Studies Programmes. In 1975 the conflict came to the Minister of Education, Ritt Bjerregaard. She decided to reorganise the Basic Studies Programmes. Exams, curricula and external marking were imposed on RUC. The students protested, but to make sure the reorganisation was implemented, the Minister installed so-called "External Managers", persons from outside RUC, who were to run RUC. The alternative would have been, without doubt, a majority decision in parliament to close RUC. The students did not accept these managers, especially not when they tried to force a new curriculum on the students a few months before the final examinations. Now RUC and other Danish universities were "occupied" by the students. In order to support the demands of RUC students, the students in other universities did not take their examinations. The conflict came to an end when the RUC students were promised that the examinations that year would not include the new curriculum.

At the same time, in May 1976, a vote in parliament resulted in a majority of only one vote to continue RUC. Several well-known and non-Marxist professors from other universities recommended the continuation of RUC by referring to the tradition of separation between research and politics, and between research and industry. The Marxist students considered the continuation a huge victory. Now the struggle was to be continued. At the Social Sciences Basic Studies Programme the older students prevented contact between the so-called "black" lecturers – those in favour of the new curriculum – and new students, as the older students thought that these lecturers would teach the students "wrong" things about society. From their political point of view the older students were without doubt right, as the boycotted teachers were non-Marxists.

To the rightwing and Social Democrats in the parliament the boycott proved that things were out of hand at RUC.

In order to avoid a new vote the Minister decided to close down the Social Sciences Basic Studies Programme until another curriculum was established. Then the teachers went on strike because they feared dismissal. The students did not study. The university was paralysed. Soon a group of left-wing lecturers began confidential talks with the external managers. These lecturers wanted to bring the confrontation between RUC and the government to an end. In secret they had negotiations with the external managers, and they agreed on a new organisation of the university, giving room for separated and autonomous departments. Each discipline (or group of disciplines) had a department of its own. The disagreements concerning attitudes towards Marxism and towards the politics of RUC were obvious in the field of Social Sciences and History where the new departments were organised not only according to different specialised programmes, but also according to different positions in the conflict amongst the lecturers. When the new departments were set up, the Social Sciences Basic Studies reopened. New specialised programmes were introduced, including what later became a very popular subject, Communication, as well as Psychology and Computer Sciences.

A majority of teachers and students was against this new regime but the students – and with them the Left – recognised their defeat. Plans for a university based on Marxist studies would never be realised. But in return, university autonomy was reinstalled in RUC and the external managers withdrew.

In 1977 the new university statutes marked the beginning of a new era. The new rector, Boel Jørgensen, who was an opponent of the new organisation of the departments, became the first female rector of a university in Denmark, and for ten years she was the leader of RUC's politics of survival and consolidation. In her period it became important to make positive stories about RUC in the newspapers and on television. It was also important that the relationship between politicians and the university was good.

Instead of talking about a university with studies in the interest of the working class, new stories were made. It was explained that “external enemies” had ruined the possibility of implementing the original plan for RUC. Of course it is true that parliament changed lots of things in RUC, but this new story disguised the fact that RUC did not have just one original idea, but several. It also downplayed the fact that interaction between different groups within RUC, even without any interference from parliament, would have been extremely difficult. The story about the university studying in the interest of the working class was also abandoned in favour of more traditional academic goals. The university went from one strategy to another in a process whereby the ideas and events of the seventies were not rejected, but interpreted in a new way.

In the late 1970s, the government's national steering bodies for universities had been reinforced. This was felt in RUC in early 1980s when the government introduced a new plan to strengthen Social Science Degree Programmes - and to close Humanities and Natural Science programmes. This made everybody in RUC stick together, no matter how much they had disagreed in the 1970s. The new password was: "RUC must continue as a university - and continue to develop".

After two years of negotiations it was decided that the specialised degrees in Psychology, Social Studies and Social Work should be closed. The Bachelor of Business Administration was established, and the Basic Studies Programmes for Social Sciences, Natural Science and the Humanities were maintained. These were unwelcome reductions, but the main goal - to make RUC continue as a university - was achieved.

In 1988 RUC was rewarded for its new strategy by, remarkably, support from the business sector. The newspaper *Politiken* had made enquiries amongst business-leaders, who – surprisingly – rewarded RUC with the maximum of five student's caps.⁶ The explanation was obvious: the students' experiences of group work made them flexible and creative in their future jobs. This was also a new story: that RUC was established in order to teach students to work in groups. And, as with the other new stories, this one hid something. It was rarely mentioned that there had always been problems with group work, that some groups did not function, and some students thought they did not learn what was needed in their future jobs. It was not made clear that this pedagogy had not been the central aim of the university from the very first day. In the 1970s, group work was a means to achieve a higher goal: studies in the interest of the working classes or flexible studies adjusted to the needs of the labour market. In fact it was not till the 1980s that the group work pedagogy gained this central position and as a consequence it is only since the mid-1990s that the pedagogy has been discussed and developed on a large scale.

Conclusion

Initially, technocrats and leftwing students and lecturers wanted RUC to be a completely new kind of university, without the traditions that they thought had stifled universities in the decades prior to the students' rebellion of 1968. Technocrats made models for RUC that would promise flexibility for students' learning. The left wing was fiercely critical of university traditions such as fixed curricula and repeated lectures.

⁶ Politiken 1988

Several new initiatives were taken at RUC, but those that were carried through, actually continued many university traditions. For example, students' independent work in groups was in keeping with traditionalists' arguments that students should undertake their own programme of reading and not be faced with courses giving fixed standpoints of the discipline. Interdisciplinarity, similarly, can be seen as a modification of Humboldtian university values and romantic or holistic ideas about the unity of law, science and humanities. This pedagogy was more a modernisation of the traditional university than a fulfilment the initial critical and radical ideas for RUC. Much of the dynamic power to make these changes came from the critical teachers and students. Despite their declared aim to change society, it was a modification or modernisation that they achieved.

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