

Corridors of Silence: University by name, but the voice of criticism is universally quiet

Surveys suggest most complainants in further education bite their tongue

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Poor management, a sub-standard psycho-social working environment, and cuts that reduce the quality of research – those are the main sources of frustration for Danish academics, according to a survey recently administered by the Danish academics' union, Dansk Magisterforening (DM).

Findings to fret over

DM wanted to probe the status of freedom of speech in public sector workplaces, and what it found was worrying.

Of the 432 respondents working at universities, government research institutes and university colleges, 167 stated they had feared negative consequences should they voice their dissatisfaction, 46 had tried to comment and eleven had experienced negative consequences. More than one in four respondents stated that the public should know about the deplorable work conditions, but few talk.

Some blame the hierarchical leadership structure introduced by the University Act of 2003 for fostering a culture of fear and sycophancy (the academic equivalent of arse-licking). The law abolished the internal autonomy universities had previously enjoyed in favour of a top-down management structure in which university leaders are no longer elected from and by the employees, but hired.

A lone voice

Back in 2003, a fourth of all Danish university professors had protested against it coming into effect, but now vocal opposition is scant.

Cases like that of Mogens Buch-Hansen – a professor at the Department of Society and Globalisation at Roskilde University (RUC), who recently gave up his position following a series of disputes with the department's manager – rarely reach the public domain.

In the case of Buch-Hansen, many of his colleagues, as well as external representatives, felt the measures imposed on his research by his manager amounted to selective prosecution.

The absolute monarch

Prompted by Information newspaper, fellow researchers admitted to the temperamental nature of the manager and his use of threats, verbal assaults and selective requirements to push out researchers. However, only one agreed to be quoted.

“At RUC, the manager is the absolute monarch of their department,” the researcher told the newspaper. “There are only advisory collegial bodies, no real participation. When you have a choleric manager, he can get angry at an individual – for no visible reason.”

Solidarity between competitors is fragile, especially when more than half of all the research employees have fixed-term contracts and are working under a powerful manager who often comes from the private sector and has little or no understanding of the subject matter.

Quietly critical

If there is no public outcry, it is not for a lack of criticism. The 2011 University Act amendment sought to ensure “that employees and students are involved and have a say in major decisions”. Parliament wanted to find out whether the universities had complied with the requirements by 2014 and commissioned a survey through the Ministry of Education that was released in May.

Of the 3,330 students and 11,220 administrative and research employees who took part, 98 percent of the university employees in leadership positions considered themselves responsive to the requests and opinions of staff and students. Only 37 percent of the students and 27 percent of the staff agreed, and only 18 and 11 percent respectively felt they could affect management decisions.

Universally unpopular

Complaining about the administration is even more popular than small-talk about the weather among University of Copenhagen (KU) students, since there is no shortage of material. Not knowing when the semester ends, receiving grades after the start of a new semester, having to bring your own printer to class, waiting months for responses concerning anything from exam dates to credit transfers are just some of the many examples of the administrative jungle that even most professors can't navigate.

Most live with it, though some without their job. Aarhus University's (AU) academic development plan launched in 2011 involved nine faculties being merged into four, 55 institutions reduced to 26, as well as a centralisation of management.

The costs of the process were, in part, compensated by a massive round of layoffs in February 2014. Approximately 300 employees lost their jobs, though none from the management layer, which did the firing.

Fuelling bureaucracy

“Organisational theory tells us that when individuals get limitless power, bureaucracy acquires its own inertia,” commented Martin Paldam, a professor of economics at AU.

“And the temptations within AU's top-ranks to actively use power was too great – they put drastic reforms in place, hired more bureaucrats, raised management wages and so on. Political and bureaucratic power in this sense is a dangerous

drug, so all organisations must have emergency brakes – but they do not exist in the University Act.”

The top-down management approach to research and teaching is reflected in the remuneration policy too. According to Paldam, only 15 of the 70 highest-paid employees at AU (from the list of salaries disclosed by the Ministry of Education) are research staff.

Following the official line

Nevertheless, not everyone blames the University Act. According to Jens Borglind, an administrative officer at KU, it'd be wrong to assume that Danish universities were democratic islands before 2003.

“People from other countries, especially America, have a hard time understanding this, but Danish universities are very much political institutions, and employees who are state employees therefore, more or less, always follow the official line,” he said.