



**Wenner-Gren Stiftelserna
Wenner-Gren Foundations**

***Institutional Perspectives on Universities:
The Role of Leadership, Administration, Stakeholders and Risks***

**An Academia Europaea and Wenner-Gren Foundations HERCulES Symposium
Wednesday May 21–Friday May 23, 2025
Wenner-Gren Center, Stockholm, Sweden**

Program Committee: Jürgen Enders (Chair), Helena Buescu, Lars Engwall, Milena Žic Fuchs and Marijk van der Wende.

Background to the symposium

For decades, students of organizations have characterized universities as a specific kind of organization and have developed highly influential concepts addressing the limited rationality of organizational behaviour based on the study of the university, such as ‘loose coupling’, ‘organized anarchy,’ or ‘garbage-can decision making’. The study of the university highlighted its fragmented nature within decentralized structures, the important role of the academic collegium in its self-governance, weak capacities to govern decision-making processes from the top. This organizational form of the university seemed coherent with the unclear and ambiguous core technologies of the university in teaching and research, and the consensus-based nature of scholarly communities within universities.

This perspective has gradually changed reflecting an ongoing socio-political struggle about the institutional form of the university as a cultural institution, a public agency, or a knowledge business. The uniqueness of the university as a special organization is not taken for granted anymore. Alternative models for universities as organizations appeared in policymaking, as well as in the study of higher education such as the corporate model of universities, the entrepreneurial model, the service model, or the stakeholder model. They all stress the university's need to become a more proper or 'complete' organization, their growing responsibilities as organizations, and their strategic capabilities for becoming masters of their own fate within a more competitive environment.

In view of these circumstances, it is time to devote a symposium to challenges that universities as institutions are facing presently and in the future. For such a symposium, four topics appear particularly relevant: 1. The role of leadership, 2. The role of university administration, 3. The role of stakeholders, and 4. The role of risks.

1. The role of leadership

Traditionally, the term 'management' was not part of the vocabulary of universities except for pointing at ways of running business organizations alien to them. The university was governed and administered but not managed. In recent decades, the development of universities is characterized by the emergence and spread of leadership and management as an increasingly accepted though contested principle of organising the modern university. One indication for this trend are changes in the role of top-level and mid-level academic leadership that is expected to take over a more managerial role as well as changes in the administrative pillar of universities toward managerial roles and practices. Another indication concerns the rise of 'management talk' in universities, for example about line management, targets and accountability, full costing, strategic planning.

Most debates on the role of leadership and management tend to fall into two camps. On the one hand, it has been argued that the modern university can only benefit from the import of ideas and practices from business based on the assumption that the latter are superior to the old academic leadership and public administration of universities. Proponents highlight the functional need for new roles in top leadership and middle management, for example of deans, in strategic management of the university and their faculty, in operational management, human resource management and performance evaluations, the academic

management of teaching and research programs, and external stakeholder relationship management. On the other hand, detrimental effects of the modern leadership and management of universities are highlighted; on the commitment of academics to their organization; undermining a sense of collegiality, values of academic freedom and participation in decisions. Proponents highlight the gap between academic and managerial norms and values, and the rise of leadership and management as a substitute for the fading faith into professionalism and professional self-regulation.

Two sessions with two speakers each will be devoted to academic leadership. The first one will focus on the recruitment of leaders in present and future universities, i.e. how leaders are selected and what kind of persons are recruited. The second session will be devoted to the tasks of university leaders, i.e. what they actually do in view of the special character of universities and the changes they are undergoing.

2. The role of university administration

The role of administration has long been of interest to organizational scholars. A basic question has been the relationship between persons whose main task is administrative duties and those who are working with the key mission of the organization. The relationship between the former and the total workforce is usually mentioned as administrative overhead. In business companies, there have been efforts for some time to reduce this parameter by decentralization to lower units and by cost control making them less apt to increase administration. Universities, so far, appear to go in the other direction. The focus on leadership in general and strong leaders in particular, has had the effect that university administration is expanding. The university leaders simply need assistance in their work. Another important explanation is the increasing governance through the market, which has been the case in many countries. This has caused a felt need in universities to add administrators in order to handle stakeholders. There is evidence that the addition of administrators is particularly happening at the top, while the administrative support to faculty members have decreased. Like in many modern organizations, the lower-level employees have to an increasing extent to handle many administrative tasks themselves.

Two sessions with two speakers each will be devoted to university administration. The first one will focus on the expansion of university administration, i.e. how the administration is

changing and what kind of staff that is recruited. The second session will be devoted to the centralization of university administration, and the effects thereof.

3. The role of stakeholders

Over recent decades, ‘autonomy’ has become a buzzword in higher education reform and universities were thought to be empowered to determine their own course of action.

Autonomy became an abiding policy issue in the relationships between the state, higher education, and society, subject to many higher education reforms. The general perception in public sector policies, including higher education, was that state micro-management was not the most effective and efficient way to coordinate and steer the sector. The traditional steering model with strong state control and weak organizational control was intended to be replaced with a model in which the state was steering from a distance and organizations were empowered in several ways to determine their own destiny. In many countries, reforms were initiated to devolve authorities and decision-making capacities from the state to the universities. Europe’s modernisation agenda for higher education is just one example of the policy belief that organizational autonomy is one of the key aspects of good governance systems. At the same time, the autonomy of universities is strongly circumscribed by their lasting financial dependence on the public purse and increasing state intervention. Other policy instruments such as contractual performance agreements, multiple accountability requirements, the inclusion of external stakeholders in university governance raised further doubts on universities’ autonomy working in the shadow of governmental rules and expectations.

Two sessions, with two speakers each, will be devoted to the topic of stakeholders. The first one will particularly focus on the role of governments, while the second will be devoted to various other stakeholders.

4. The role of risks

Perceived failure of the institution at stake is often seen as the cause of institutional crisis.

The institution is perceived as not meeting functional expectations and lack of performance may also undermine longstanding trust into its normative basis. Developments around the modern university suggest that an institutional crisis may also be caused by institutional success. The university has in many ways been a success. Over recent decades, the university has grown enormously, attracting ever more students, extending its research into more and

more areas, and being asked to take up more and more roles in contributing to solving socio-economic problems of modern societies. The university has developed into a key institution of the 'knowledge society'.

Yet, the university also seems to have become a victim of its success facing work overload, rising and sometimes unrealistic expectations, and a more utilitarian perspective on the role of the university in society. Educational expansion, austerity, and ongoing political reform have all affected universities. Governments seem to have lost some faith in universities funding them no longer for what they are but for what they achieve under the condition that they align to governmental expectations and priorities. Parents and students increasingly ask if universities are still the right place to prepare graduates with the skills needed for employability and advanced careers. Higher education has also become a much broader church including public and private institutions that would traditionally not have been considered a university proper. Last but not least, higher education is increasingly thought of as a directly economic factor (being itself profit-oriented or market-mediated); and, where it is perceived as being outside the market, it is expected to contribute directly to economic competitiveness.

Two sessions, with two speakers, each will be devoted to the role of risks. The first one will focus on the risks of a broader scepticism towards higher education. The second session will be devoted to the risks of university being challenged by other kinds of institutions and by a critique of decreasing relevance of research.

Participation

Members of Academia Europaea who are interested in participating in the event are cordially invited to contact **Maria Helgöstm** (maria.helgostam@swgc.org), The Wenner-Gren Foundations, to receive a personal invitation with all event details.

Program

Wednesday, May 21, 2025

Welcome address

Carl-Henrik Heldin, Professor in Molecular Cell Biology, Uppsala University, Sweden and Science Secretary of the Wenner-Gren Foundations.

Milena Žic Fuchs, Professor of Linguistics, University of Zagreb, Croatia and HERCulES chair.

Keynote – The University as an institution

Francisco Ramirez, Professor of Education and Sociology, Stanford University, USA

Session 1: Leadership: The recruitment of university leaders

Chair: *Liviu Matei*, Professor of Higher Education and Public Policy, Head of the King's College School of Education, Communication & Society (ECS) and HERCuLES member.

Richard Bolden, Professor of Leadership and Management, Faculty of Business and Law, University of the West of England, UK.

Lars Engwall, Professor of Business Studies, Uppsala University, Sweden.

Session 2: Leadership: The work of university leaders

Chair: *Jean-Pierre Bourguignon*, Professor of Mathematics, Honorary Professor at the Institut des Hautes Études Scientifiques, former President of the European Research Council (ERC) and HERCuLES member.

Anders Söderholm, Professor of Business Administration, President of the Royal Institute of Technology, former Rector of the Mid Sweden University, Sweden.

Peter-Paul Verbeek, Professor of Philosophy and Ethics of Science and Technology in a Changing World and Rector Magnificus of the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

Thursday, May 22, 2025

Session 3: Administration: Expansion

Chair: *Alban Kellerbauer*, Professor of Nuclear Physics, Joint Research Centre, Karlsruhe, Germany and HERCuLES member.

Christian Schneiderberg, PhD, Senior Researcher, International Center for Higher Education Research, University of Kassel, Germany.

Celia Whitchurch, Honorary Professor, IoE, University College London, UK.

Session 4: Administration: Centralization

Chair: *Kirsten Drotner*, Professor of Media Studies, University of Southern Denmark, Denmark and HERCuLES member.

Kerstin Sahlin, Professor of Public Management and former Deputy Vice-Chancellor, University of Uppsala, Sweden.

Roxana Baltaru, Professor of Sociology, University of Bergen, Norway.

Session 5: Stakeholders: The state

Chair: *Jo Tollebeek*, Professor of Cultural History, University of Leuven, Belgium and HERCuLES member.

Pedro N. Teixeira, Professor in Economics, University of Porto, Director of the Centre of Research on Higher Education Policy, and former Secretary of State for Higher Education in the Portuguese Government.

Marijk van der Wende, Professor of Higher Education, University of Utrecht, the Netherlands, and HERCuLES member.

Session 6: Stakeholders: Beyond the state

Chair: *Helena Buescu*, Professor of Comparative Literature, University of Lisbon, Portugal and HERCuLES member.

Barbara Schachermayer-Sporn, Professor and Head of the Institute for Higher Education Management, former Vice-Rector for Research, International Affairs and External Relations, Wirtschaftsuniversität Wien, Austria.

André Keet, Professor for Critical Studies in Higher Education Transformation and Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Engagement and Transformation at Nelson Mandela University, South Africa.

Friday, May 23, 2025

Session 7: Risks: Challenges of education

Chair: *Marie-Laure Salles*, Professor Sociology of Organisations and Directory of the Geneva Graduate Institute, Switzerland and HERCuLES member.

Kai Nordlund, Professor in Computational Materials Physics, Vice-Rector of the University of Helsinki, Finland.

Michael Huber, Professor of Sociology of Regulation (Higher Education Studies), Faculty of Sociology, University of Bielefeld, Germany.

Session 8: Risks: Challenges of research

Chair: *Georgi Sharvashidze*, Professor of Education, Tbilisi State University, Georgia and HERCuLES member.

Nicoline Frølich, Professor and Director, Centre for Learning, Innovation & Academic Development, University of Oslo, Norway.

Yuzhuo Cai, Professor of Higher Education, Tampere University, Finland, and Visiting Professor, Beijing Normal University, China.

Concluding panel

Chair: *Jürgen Enders*, Professor of Higher Education Management, University of Bath, United Kingdom and HERCuLES member.

Panelists:

Kirsten Drotner, Professor of Media Studies, University of Southern Denmark, Denmark and

HERCulES member.

Gemma Modinos, Professor of Neuroscience, King's College, London, United Kingdom and HERCulES member.

Jo Tollebeek, Professor of Cultural History, University of Leuven, Belgium and HERCulES member.