



The analysis panel's comments on the expert group's report

"ACCESSIBLE MANAGEMENT, INCLUSION AND ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT"

The analysis panel
June 2014

*Analysis of
internal
organisational
problems
at Aarhus
University*



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Comments on the expert group's report

“Main report; Accessible management, inclusion and administrative support: the internal problem analysis at Aarhus University”, The expert group, June 2014.

1. Background

In autumn 2013, the senior management of Aarhus University decided to commission an internal



problem analysis in order to identify the significant problems that have arisen as a consequence of the organisational and administrative changes that have been implemented in connection with the academic development process.

In January 2014, the senior management team appointed an analysis panel with representatives from the university's academic councils, the main liaison committee, the student body and the administration, cf. the text box below. In collaboration with the senior management team, the analysis panel was responsible for appointing the internal expert group and developing the mandate for the expert group's work. The analysis panel has been kept informed about the progress of the expert group's work, and concludes its work with these comments on the internal expert group's report. The comments are put forward unanimously.

The members of the analysis panel

Nominated by the academic councils:

Associate Professor Morten Raffnsøe-Møller, Arts
Head of Section Mogens Vestergaard, Science and Technology
Professor Jørn Flohr Nielsen, Business and Social Sciences (chair)
Associate Professor Kamille Smidt Rasmussen, Health (until 1 June)
Professor Kim Overvad, Health (starting in June)

Nominated by the students:

Christian Kraglund, physics PhD student (enrolled as a student)
Sune Koch Rønnow, student, classical archaeology

Nominated by the Main Liaison Committee:

Joint Union Representative Aase Pedersen
Joint Union Representative Per Dahl

Nominated by the administration:

Deputy Director Louise Gade
Administration Manager Niels Damgaard Hansen

Secretary

Special Consultant Rebekka Sylvest

2. Summary

Generally speaking, the analysis panel finds the expert group's work to be highly satisfactory, and considers it to be in compliance with the mandate developed by the panel in collaboration with the senior management team. The analysis panel also finds satisfactory the fact that the expert group has proposed possible solutions as a natural continuation of the survey. In a very short time, the



expert group has produced an extremely valuable analysis that will provide a point of departure for the work to come. The analysis panel finds particularly well-documented the conclusion that many of the problems students and staff experience can be traced back to the far-reaching standardisation and centralisation that has taken place as a consequence of the academic development process.

The academic development process has furthered a culture in which the benefits of economies of scale and uniform university-wide solutions for all main academic areas and departments have been emphasised, at the expense of inclusion, co-determination and local scope for independent action. While the analysis panel acknowledges the advantages of a certain level of standardisation and large-scale operation, the quality of administrative support provided has not been satisfactory in all cases, and the senior management has not delegated formal and practical responsibility in the appropriate areas necessary to ensure a framework that promotes accessible management and inclusion.

In this connection, the analysis panel wishes to draw particular attention to two issues that are not presented with absolute clarity in the expert group's report:

- 1) that the academic development process has promoted an inappropriate, top-heavy managerial culture and practice, which it will be absolutely crucial to discuss at several levels of management, and
- 2) the diversity and variety that characterises Aarhus University - in terms of activities, disciplines and geography - demands an organisation that respects local differences and co-ownership in combination with due consideration for the university as a coherent whole.

Below, the analysis panel will identify the most urgent problems that need to be addressed, and will specify the conclusions in the expert group report the panel is particularly in agreement with. Where relevant, reference will be made to the solutions proposed by the expert group. However, as proposing explicit solutions is outside the panel's purview, references to possible solutions should be understood as a necessary point of departure for concrete discussions that can result in solutions. While it is the analysis panel's hope these comments may contribute to a prioritisation of the issues at hand, the work of the expert group and the many valuable contributions from Aarhus University's staff and students should be drawn on in the work to be done now. In the next stages of the process, sufficient time should be allowed for genuine inclusion of staff and students, and not all initiatives should be launched simultaneously.

Given the nature of the case, the analysis panel's comments focus on problems, and not on all the positive things at Aarhus University. But we do wish to acknowledge that the senior management team has taken an important first step towards improving conditions in commissioning the internal



problem analysis.

3. Delegation of managerial responsibility and accessibility

(Chapter 3 of the main report)

“In the expert group’s view...there is a significant need to improve real inclusion and co-determination.”

(Page 22, main report)

That Aarhus University’s staff and students perceive that there are problems related to a lack of inclusion and co-determination is not only documented in the expert group’s report. It is also confirmed by a recent ministerial survey which shows that Aarhus University’s management at all levels is viewed as least inclusive and receptive as compared to all other Danish universities. This tendency has intensified since 2009 (the Danish Agency for Higher Education, 2014). The expert group’s survey reveals problems related to both formal and real possibilities for being included and exercising co-determination in relation to management.

Problems related to issues of lack of employee inclusion and co-determination and managers’ accessibility can have several causes:

1. The lack of formal, structural and organisational forums and institutions.
2. A managerial culture and practice that is non-inclusive.
3. A failure to delegate decision-making authority to the relevant levels and individuals.
4. Forms of communication and media that encourage one-way communication or that discourage discussion.
5. Employees and students who do not engage themselves in the university.

The analysis panel endorses with the expert group’s assessment that Aarhus University’s problems centre on 2, 3 and 4. Management’s behaviour, competences and scope for action should be a central focus, both as part of the problem as well as part of the solution.

Limited formal possibilities for inclusion do not appear to be the greatest problem. On the contrary, the problems caused by the failure of department heads and deans to include employees in practice should be emphasised. In this respect, there are differences between departments and between main academic areas. *The panel also endorses the expert group’s conclusion that “some deans can do more to take advantage of the existing channels for inclusion and co-determination”.* Some steps towards improving these conditions have been taken in connection with the university’s psychological APV action plans. However, these are by no means sufficient, and neither the expert group’s report nor the ministerial survey reveals visible progress. The management culture and the



university's managers as individuals are often decisive for how employees experience that they are included. This applies to technical-administrative staff, who do not have the same possibilities of exercising influence as academic staff, who are strongly represented in formal forums such as the academic councils, boards of studies, departmental forums, etc. But the fundamental problem of a lack of receptiveness on the part of management is also experienced by academic staff in relation to current practice in the formal forums.

The more formal dimension of the centralisation of decision-making processes at the level of the university's senior management is reflected in a limited and often inconsistent practice with regard to delegation of authority, which takes place at several levels at the university. The analysis panel endorses a decentralisation of decision-making, which will bring activities, competences and managerial responsibility in line by means of delegation. That delegation of authority must take place to a sufficient extent, with sufficient precision, and with sufficiently clear limitations - and that it should be subsequently respected by the delegating authority - should be a fundamental principal of effective management.

Another fundamental principal ought to be that with decision-making authority (power) comes responsibility. This applies not least to financial management. The recent cutbacks appear to have been distributed in a way that far from all consider just and transparent (See the section on administrative support below.).

The expert group's work also indicates that there are major problems with the university's communication, and that both internal and external communication must be fundamentally rethought. With regard to internal communication, it is problematic that communication from the central administration is perceived as 'selling' the senior management's messages. With regard to external communication, it is problematic that communication is not perceived as sober, competent dissemination of the main academic areas' research and degree programmes. On a very concrete level, staff and students experience problems with websites that are still not sufficiently user-friendly. In this area as well, it appears necessary to rethink the university's and management's communication in the direction of a 'university public sphere' where discussions take place.

Therefore, the analysis panel recommends that steps be taken to:

- implement an inclusive management practice and culture among managers at all levels
- exploit existing possibilities for appropriate formal and real delegation of authority



- rethink and change how the university communicates, among other things in order to create space for argument and discussion

4. The organisational and managerial structure and operation of the main academic areas

(Chapter 4 of the main report)

“...the problems revolve around the centralisation of power and responsibility, the reasons behind the departmental structure, the approach to handling geographical and cultural diversity and the lack of consideration for the university’s diversity”

(Page 35, main report)

The analysis panel endorses the broad conclusion that the university’s centralisation and standardisation have challenged the university’s ability to manage differences in tasks, geography and culture, organisationally, managerially and administratively. The main goal of the problem solution process must be to establish a new balance between diverse, local and meaningful collegial environments on the one hand, and managerial and organisational unity on the other hand.

Among the solutions named by the expert group with regard to the organisation and management of the main academic areas, the panel wishes to highlight the recommendation to “reconsider the structure in relation to the departments whose staff does not describe them as meaningful units. This must take place in the context of close dialogue between the dean and the departments in question”, as well as the recommendation to “respect the university’s diversity by establishing flexible forms of institutional autonomy with due consideration for geographical differences and differences in academic profile. The departments do not need to be identical and be managed in the same way.”

With regard to organisational change, it should be noted that identity and academic specialisations are far from always anchored in units that are perceived as coherent and meaningful under the current system. Several large departments are perceived by many employees as less meaningful units. In this regard, the senior management must demonstrate due regard for the university’s diversity, and to the extent that departmental structure is reconsidered, local employees and department heads should have a decisive influence on and co-ownership in the process. Similarly, the fact that it is hardly possible to return to a structure with small departments gives rise to the consideration that it may be necessary to establish meaningful units in underlying structures and



networks instead.

In connection with structural considerations, the relationship between the very broad boards of studies, departmental forums and departments should be considered. With due regard for the fact that the boards of studies are one of the students' most important channels for exercising influence, the possibility of giving students on certain degree programmes better possibilities for exercising influence should be considered, for example by establishing more boards of studies or structuring the boards of studies differently. At the same time, cooperation between departments and main academic areas must ensure that Aarhus University in reality has an 'inner education market'.

With regard to the exercise of management by department heads, it is problematic that the conditions that have been created at the departments often make it difficult for department heads to perform their most important duties - academic management and personnel management - because they spend so much time on administrative duties. An upgrade of their managerial qualifications is scarcely the answer in all cases. This does not mean it is possible to exempt department heads from all involvement in administrative work. But it is problematic that they do not always receive adequate administrative support, for example from bookkeeping staff, on account of the organisational - and in many cases more importantly, physical - distance between the parties involved (see below for a more detailed discussion). In some cases, these problems can be mitigated by good personal relationships and mutual understanding.

Therefore, the analysis panel recommends that steps be taken to:

- adjust the structure of the organisation to create units that are perceived as meaningful by staff, students and management.
- work towards change that reflects the diversity of the university's tasks, academic and professional communities and cross-cutting networks.
- anchor organisational change locally (and with local co-ownership) to ensure diversity, co-ownership and a sense of unity.



5. Administrative support

(Chapter 5 of the main report)

“...indicates that the current organisation has created a greater divide between academic and technical-administrative personnel. Students also emphasise the importance of accessibility as an important factor...”

“...a need to create room for more flexible solutions and adjustments of administrative solutions in order to support the university’s core activities more effectively. At the same time, there is a need to ensure greater transparency with regard to how resources are spent...”

(Pages 33 and 52 of the main report)

As documented by international research, there are sometimes conflicts between employees and administrators. The employees of the departments’ criticism of the administration must be understood in this light. From the perspective of academic staff, there are significant problems related to the resources spent on administration, and only few academic staff members agree that the academic development process has made the administration more professional. However, it is important to emphasise that there are also administrative employees who think that there are problems with the administration.

The report points out a number of important problems related to how the departments cooperate with the administration. These important problems are summarized in Appendix IV of the report (in Danish), and relate to virtually all areas, although many employees and students also single out individual areas as being in need of an individual overhaul. This overhaul must be undertaken on the background of the valuable material that is analysed in Appendix IV.

The analysis panel identifies three main causes of the administrative problems in the expert group’s report:

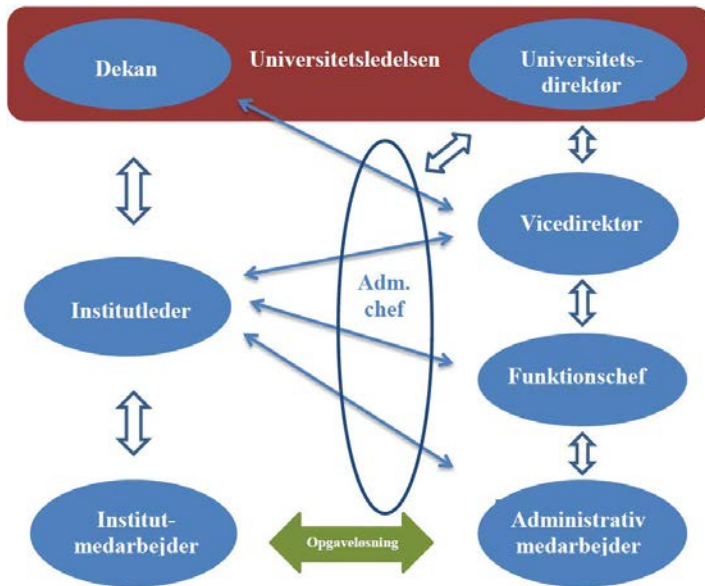
1. **The centralisation, relocation and division into units defined by function** of a number of administrative functions at the expense of local administrative functions. This has produced an administrative structure with a pronounced administrative division into function-specific silos at the central level out of a desire to improve the quality and



efficiency of the administration. This has not succeeded in all cases, and as the expert group points out, the changes were too narrowly bound to an interpretation of administrative quality as narrow professional competence. The analysis panel fully endorses the expert group's recommendation that administrative support should be based on a broader conception of quality that includes such dimensions as local knowledge, rapid response, coherence, insight, responsibility and initiative. This broader conception of administrative quality should be applied to solving the problems in the administration, and administrative staff should have closer affiliations to the departments. This may entail relocating some administrative staff members to the departments.

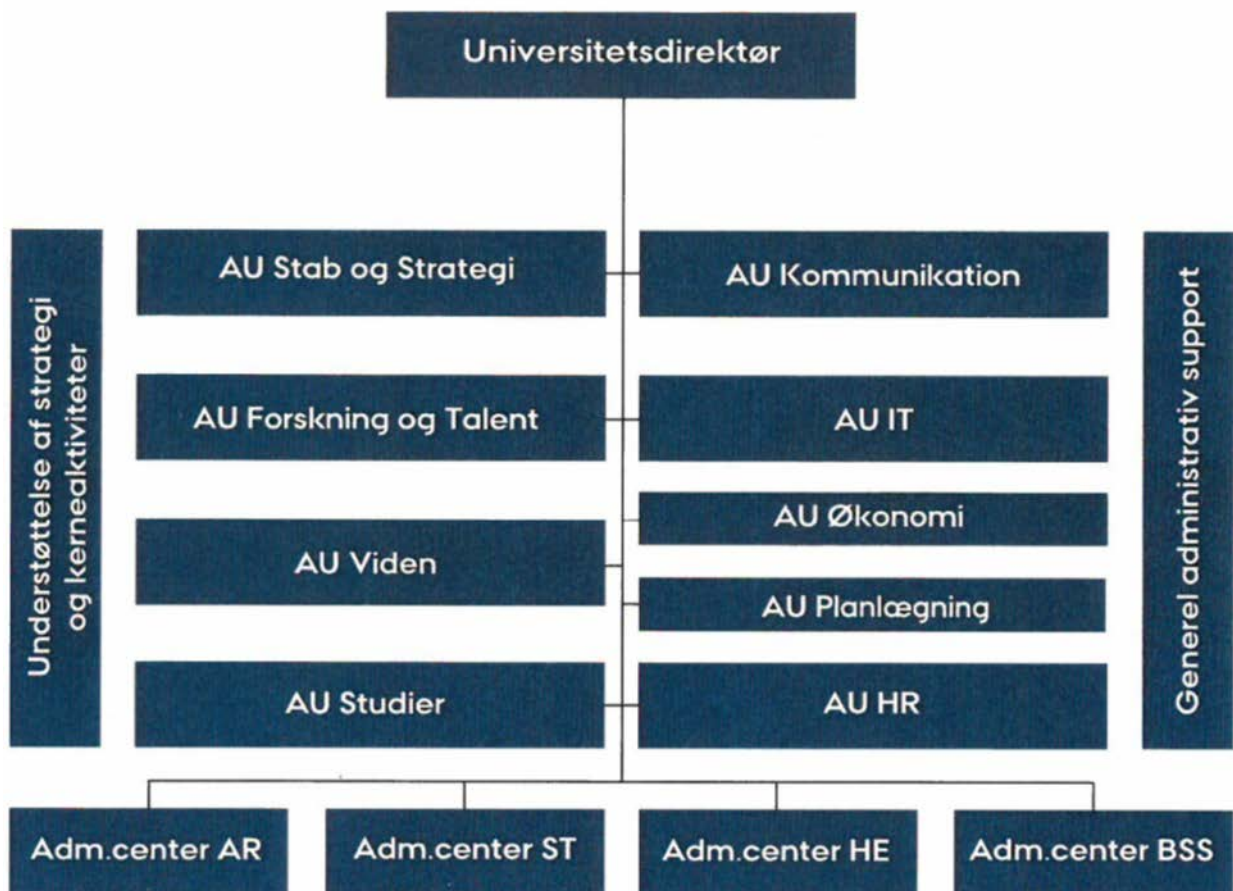
2. **An extremely complicated and top-heavy organisational structure** with nine administrative silos, in which the coordination of individual functions and the performance of cross-cutting or non-routine tasks creates a need for coordination at several (and most often higher) organisational levels, as illustrated in figures 1 and 2 (in Danish).
3. **The balance between payment rendered and services received** appears to be associated with particularly serious problems. The analysis panel is in full agreement with the expert group's emphasis on the problems related to a lack of direct connection between payment and services ('deliverables'): the administration's share of the budget, including overhead, is often perceived by the departments as a tax levied on the funding that the departments have earned through teaching (student FTEs) or external grants. And this tax is not always considered to be proportionate to the services that are provided in return. A system of incentives should be promoted that does not make receiving external grants more difficult. In all cases, lack of financial transparency and complicated cash flows are a major problem that is linked to the complexity of the organisational structure. This can contribute to less efficient administration. There are particular good grounds for considering what can be done both long-term and short-term to produce more clarity, including consideration of the extent to which the organisation of VIP and TAP in different managerial hierarchies is part of the problems related to resource allocation.

Figure 1: Simplified organogram - administration (in Danish) (Figure 5 of the main report)



Note: The formal chain of command is indicated by and possible points of contact are indicated by .
Figure 2: Chart illustrating the organisation (in Danish)

Overordnet beskrivelse af administrationen





In connection with the identification and solution of administrative problems, the analysis panel wishes to emphasise that the problems are caused by the structure of the organisation and its management, and that the individual staff members who provide support to the departments and the students, and who find themselves in a difficult conflict of interests, should not be held responsible for these problems. Within the given framework, there is generally a high degree of satisfaction with the work performed by these employees.

Similarly, in the event that the introduction of a higher degree of decentralisation is considered, such as relocation of employees to main academic areas and departments, the process should involve administrative employees in a constructive dialogue.

The analysis recommends that the objectives of the reorganisation of the administration should be simplification, accessibility, clarity and transparency. This also requires that the organisational changes take their point of departure in the broad definition of administrative quality described above.

Therefore, the analysis panel recommends that steps be taken to:

- simplify administrative functions and managerial hierarchies to better support the performance and coordination of the university's core activities.
- achieve more coherent, flexible administrative routines and procedures (including simpler access to the administrative systems) through better possibilities for self-management and coordination at lower levels of the organisation.
- introduce financial management that allows a higher degree of autonomy, transparency and cost consciousness at operational level.



6. The next steps in the process

The analysis panel wishes to emphasise that not all of the problems that can be identified can be solved in the short term. The panel recommends that the solution of more fundamental problems that require deliberation should emerge from a process that prevents the solutions arrived at being perceived as the sole property of the management. Even the changes that have the nature of necessary adjustments should be introduced through an inclusive process with room for debate and dialogue involving management, students and management. This is particularly important because the problems Aarhus University is facing are precisely the product of the absence of inclusion. This would also harmonise with the ‘trust reform’ that has just been launched by the government and personnel organisations.

The first step in a process leading to solutions to the university’s problems has been taken by the management with the decision to commission the internal problem analysis, which is in itself an important form of inclusion. This inclusive gesture has received a genuine, valuable response from staff and students. The report makes this clear. The expert group’s analysis is not only based on a high survey response rate. Employees and students also participated in interviews with a high degree of engagement. Many have taken the opportunity to contribute supplementary comments on the survey. Over 800 pages of comments on the survey’s closed-ended questions have been received. The analysis panel recommends that these comments should be treated as valuable input to discussions of concrete problems and issues. Similarly, the background reports contain numerous comparisons that can inspire concrete improvements.

The senior management team has taken an important step towards creating co-ownership in the organisation by drawing on internal expertise, motivation and resources in the process of identifying and analysing the university’s problems. The overwhelming participation of students and staff and their detailed comments confirm the presence of these factors. The analysis panel recommends that this process, which emphasises the importance of co-ownership and individual autonomy at Aarhus University, should also be respected as we move forward.

The work of the expert panel in its entirety should be drawn on in the work to come, and all of Aarhus University’s core activities deserve the attention of management. Not only research and teaching, but also the other two core activities, talent development and knowledge exchange (including public sector consultancy and continuing/further education) face challenges in the new university structure and deserve a more detailed analysis.



The next step should be a response to the internal problem analysis on the part of the senior management that draws on employees' constructive participation in this analysis. It would be desirable for the management's plan for the process going forward to clearly state how employees are to be included. In any case, the process should be characterised by dialogue between the parties involved, not by dramatic, hasty changes in an organisation that contains a great capacity for development and improvement if given sufficient space and time. This will require better change management. It is necessary to strike a balance between the need to implement necessary changes and employees' need to perform their daily work under reasonable conditions.

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