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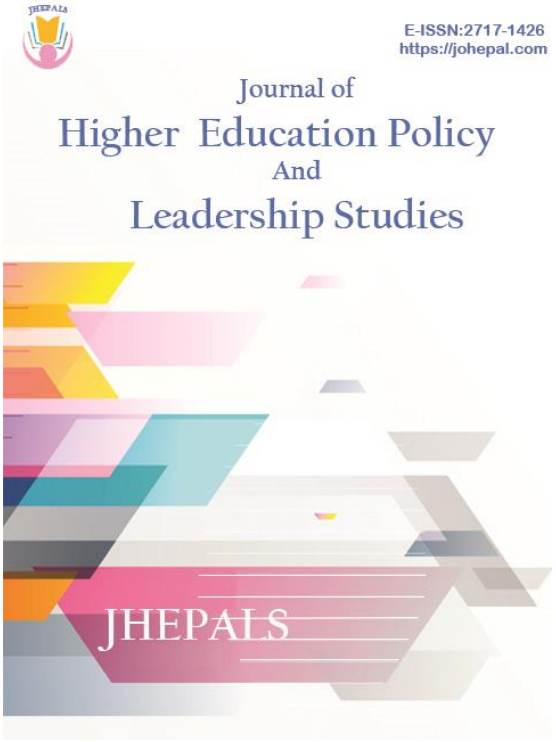

University Leadership Based in the Humanities: An Interview with Prof. Hanne Leth Andersen

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Interview

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Prof. Hanne Leth Andersen is Rector at Roskilde University, Denmark. Before she came to Roskilde, she has served at the Faculty of Arts at Aarhus University as associate dean and professor of university pedagogy and at Copenhagen Business School (CBS) as professor and director of the CBS Learning Lab.

Hanne Leth Andersen chairs the educational committee of the Danish Rectors' Conference, and she is a member of executive boards, international councils and committees such as the International Advisory Board for the Research Council of Norway and the expert evaluation panel for The Academy of Finland for Competitive funding to strengthen universities' research profiles. She has served as President of the international expert committee for the French Government's investment program on University Program Development, Nouveaux Cursus à l'Université. She has international experience as an expert in Quality Assurance and Quality Development, as an expert for the Norwegian Quality Assurance Agency, NOKUT, and for the European University Association, EUA, and as member of the Danish Accreditation Council. Hanne Leth Andersen is the author of more than 120 scientific articles in Danish and international journals and several monographs. She holds a PhD in French Language and an MA in Romance Philology, both from University of Copenhagen.

In 2021, she received the Legion of Honour (l'Ordre de la Légion d'Honneur), the highest civilian honour in France and in 2015 the title of Commander of the Order of Academic Palms (l'Ordre des Palmes Académiques) the highest honour awarded to academics in France. She is also Knight of the Danish Dannebrog Order. In 2005, Aarhus University Awarded her its Price for Excellent and Innovative Teaching.

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Andersen, H. L.

It is with honor and privilege for us to host Prof. & Rector Hanne Leth Andersen (Roskilde University, Denmark) as a globally renowned higher education leader and scholar whose research, books, talks, interviews, and notes are extensively cited and acknowledged throughout the world.

We understand Prof. Andersen's tough and fully scheduled program as the Rector of the Roskilde University; in this regard, we appreciate her commitment to the scientific community to accept our invitation for the March issue 2022 Interview at the Journal of Higher Education Policy and Leadership Studies.

We are sure that Prof. Andersen's insightful, illuminating and critical responses to the following questions will be of interest to a broad audience of the international researchers, students, policymakers, and leaders in Higher Education.

Question #1

As the Rector of Roskilde University, what are your experiences (as a female HE leader) about the leadership and governance of a higher education institute (HEI) in 21st century? It would be great if you could kindly help us imagine your lived experiences as a female leader of a HEI.

Answer:

It is difficult to distinguish what part of my experiences as a HE leader are linked to the fact that I am a female leader, be it from my colleagues and collaborators' point of view, or in my own subjective understanding. I value honest and direct communication, respect of all functions at the university, and building collaboration across different areas and groups at university. Roskilde University is a national research-intensive university with research and education at an international level, placed in the region of Zealand, next to the capital region and not far from Copenhagen. I prioritize building relationships with internal and external communities, politicians at both national and regional level. I try to understand the cultures inside and outside university, and I invite people to say what they mean. I always welcome invitations to speak at local events, to be a keynote at conferences, and to serve on local boards and national and international councils. I find it important and stimulating to have a positive presence both at campus, in the region and nationally. All this gives me a very active work life, but I believe it is important for the image of my university and for the idea of change happening at Roskilde University. However, I do not do all this alone: Getting the right team is essential. It is always my ambition to work with a dynamic group of leaders and to give space for new ideas with the appreciation of the profile and the foundations of the university. Roskilde University has a tradition for influence, cooperation and access to the leadership. The Academic Council may only have an advisory role in today's Danish universities, but we aim to secure its influence and also that of the department committees in order to share the direction of the university. Freedom of research is not questioned, and the study boards have an equal number of students and researchers and can make decisions within a framework for the educational programs.

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I chose Roskilde University because the university had a clear desire to move forward with its reform pedagogy and transdisciplinary problem-oriented project work. In that way, my professionalism as an expert of university pedagogy has a direct impact on my leadership: an overarching goal is to develop RUC's education and pedagogy in a direction that fits the actual world. We have worked on the institutional mission statement, clarified core values, and established a collective vision and strategy for the future, with input from all departments and from the administration. This should support setting direction for all the different types of actors, in collaboration or with appropriate involvement.

It is in the day-to-day management with all its administrative, strategic and human challenges, I believe my humanities and pedagogy background is an advantage. I bring a strong interest in people and relationships with me, and I have been trained in leading a classroom, engaging participants, reading their body language and finding the best ways to move forward towards a goal.

I do not experience significant problems associated with being a female top manager. When you are at the top of an organisation, I would say that people normally hear and respect you. It may well happen before selection of a woman as the top leader that you experience a bias: Is she strong enough, will she have the guts to take hard times, will people respect her? However, I can still experience male peers in meetings who only seem to hear what men say and only quote men, even if a woman has said the same thing first. Moreover, we know from research that we have a tendency to think that women speak for too long, even if the length of their contributions are shorter than that of their male colleagues.

The combination of being a woman, a humanist and a top manager is not very common, but could well be. I think we should take a closer look at how humanistic disciplines provide relevant competences for leadership and management. I would recommend that one see the humanities as a ticket to leadership, rather than requiring women to study STEM, economics, management or organisation before they can become leaders. In my view, competences from disciplines such as language, culture and communication are very relevant. Then, a top manager will always surround herself with people from other disciplines and with supplementary competences.

Question #2

In a world where the wealthy are becoming more well-off and the underprivileged people more disadvantaged, what is good governance at today's university and what does it mean?

Answer:

Good governance at universities of today and of the future is about opening up the university to the outside world so that we can contribute to solving society's challenges, for example in the areas of unequal access to knowledge and research results, to education and health. This is both a local and a global challenge.

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At Roskilde University, we are in close contact with our region and its municipalities when it comes to dealing with challenges in health promotion, urban development and infrastructure, protection of the environment and access to education. We aim for international research excellence in all our areas, and at the same time, we develop our special profile in the national university landscape. We have obligations to contribute to the development and cooperation with our local surroundings. We have specific collaboration agreements with local municipalities in the whole region, and with the government of the region. The regional perspective is more and more central at the political level because the gap between the rural areas and the capital is growing. There is a need to bring programmes and students more directly in touch with local municipalities, companies, and business organisations. In addition, there is a need to attract more resources for research in the disadvantaged areas.

When it comes to the global challenges, poverty and climate change with consequences for the underprivileged, good governance can consist of supporting research and education dealing with these contexts. We must develop collaboration with universities from different parts of the world, global competences in all types of programs, study grants to less privileged students etc. Roskilde University has founded the Critical Edge Alliance (CEA) with eight universities across the globe, sharing a dedication to active citizenship, human understanding across differences, social engagement, and collaboration across disciplines and among faculty and students. The goal is to share experiences of learning and teaching, joint projects of progressive higher education, and sponsoring student exchange.

Question #3

How do you portray the social responsibility of the universities? Can the leadership of today's universities play a robust role against the inequalities of the world, especially inequality in the production and consumption of knowledge or equal access to quality higher education for all?

Answer:

Regarding inequality in access to knowledge, RUC has a long tradition of respectful collaboration with its surrounding world, for example through action research, where research benefits those who are the subject of the research because they participate in it at the same time. This can be when collaborating with those closest to the core of the research object, be it school teachers, nurses or educators, who themselves feel professionally empowered and enriched by the research process and results. It is far more threatening for the independence of research to believe that knowledge can be commissioned on demand. Knowledge is not a product or a commodity that you can buy, sell or even hand over. Complex knowledge requires complex understanding. That is why it is important that the university engages in co-creation with its surrounding world and that our collaborations take place between equal actors in an ecosystem. It is obvious that we should work together to create knowledge that is both excellent and relevant.

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Fundamentally, I believe that equal access to university education is a key social responsibility of universities. Even in Denmark, where university education is free for all, with good scholarships to all students, we have major challenges with equal access. In fact, Denmark's ability to support social mobility has declined. This problem relates to working methods and examination forms and to an admission system that is advantageous for children with parents with an academic background. The widening participation movement from the UK inspires me, as it is concerned with the need for the top of a cohesive and harmonious society to bring in talent from all walks of life, to create a cohesive society. This will also be an important agenda in Denmark.

Question #4

How do you think universities can prevent new global tensions and conflicts (such as those between Russia and Ukraine)? Can universities prevent a new world war? How?

Answer:

Universities have an important role to play in supporting people-to-people understanding. Intercultural understanding is formed in international research collaborations or when students go on exchange and experience other cultures and languages. They see how their own subject is different in another intellectual and institutional culture. I believe that people-to-people understanding can prevent conflicts and help us address international challenges like climate change and digitalisation.

That said, we should not be naive. International trade wars and industrial espionage limit how much technology and knowledge we can share and with whom. We need to be aware of this. The current war between Russia and Ukraine shows that we can get to the point where we have to withdraw our researchers and students. Once the war rages, it is not us who can stop it. Universities are not diplomacy. Nevertheless, I am convinced that we have an important role to play in reconstruction and prevention.

International relations are peace preserving. Students and artisans have always travelled, and with good reason. They share cultural capital, develop mutual understanding and create relations. That is the purpose of student mobility. A powerful example of this is the international University Campus in Paris, which was created in the aftermath of the First World War as part of the pacifist movement. Its aim was to promote friendship between peoples by welcoming foreign students, professors, artists and athletes and to improve accommodation for Parisian students. By an agreement signed on 7 June 1921, the State and the City of Paris entrusted the University of Paris with this noble task and donated the land for this intercultural campus.
We still need to encourage understanding, friendship and respect across differences. And after the war in Ukraine, we as universities must ask ourselves whether we are doing enough to rebuild people-to-people understanding.

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Question #5

How do you see the future of the university governance? Who will be the winner in the race between the 21st century university and the governance of the market or the institutes of power? Can we witness the resistance of the university or its loss?

Answer:

This is not a situation of dichotomy, where we as universities either "lose" and succumb to market forces and state interference, or instead "win" our independence in the ivory tower. Instead, we must understand that the modern social contract between university and society places us in a continuous relationship of mutual dependence with both the state and the market. The state funds higher education institutions and expects us to collaborate with private institutions and business (the market) to react to and perhaps help solve society's challenges. This means that the independence of the university is not an unquestionable privilege. Rather, the meaning of independence must be continually reinterpreted and rearticulated as society evolves. We, as universities, have an obligation to engage actively in those processes of interpretation and demonstrate both our value for society and the fundamental value of autonomy.

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