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**Abstract**

The article introduces this special issue of Higher Education Quarterly in which results of a research project on 'European Flagship Universities: Balancing Academic Excellence and Socio-economic Relevance' are presented and discussed. The Flagship project aimed at contributing to a better understanding of the relationship between university reform agendas, with their underlying ideologies, and university practices, especially at the departmental level. The project focused on how selected Flagship universities in continental Europe interpret and use their institutional autonomy in two areas, research management and personnel policies. For this purpose an analytical framework was developed for studying how autonomy is interpreted and used inside the university (HRK / Abstract übernommen)