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Abstract

Owing to their common history, similarities in language and culture, long traditions in political collaboration and the shared Nordic societal model, an assumption is often made that the operational and regulatory context of universities is similar in the five Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. In this article, we examine the relationship between the Nordic higher education institutions and their specific governments. The interpretation of institutional autonomy and academic freedom in the Nordic countries is discussed with support from recently collected empirical data, Nordic university legislation and the topical research literature. We describe the differences in legislation on academic freedom and the status of institutional autonomy, as assessed by a recent study by the European University Association and ask whether the autonomy frameworks of the universities in the Nordic countries are as congruous as their shared history and similar societal

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contexts suggest. We also ask whether the increase of institutional autonomy in the Nordic countries has contributed to a decline or rearticulation of academic freedom. We conclude that despite the differences between Nordic countries, the level of institutional autonomy is relatively high in comparison with their European counterparts, with most restrictions found in financial autonomy. Concerns about academic freedom are mainly centred on freedom of research, which has been restricted as a consequence of both increased institutional autonomy and new steering mechanisms.

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