Translating government digitalisation policy in higher education institutions: the Danish case

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Abstract
The Danish national government (2018) prioritises a proactive digitalisation of the public sector, including higher education institutions (HEIs). HEIs are facing major changes and need to integrate increasingly advanced digital technologies, and might soon be significantly different from what they are today. The mechanisms linking national policy discourses and the implementation of actual, new practices are not well documented. Drawing from the insights of Scandinavian neo-institutionalism and discursive institutionalism about the travelling and translation of ideas in specific national and organisational contexts, the article investigates one aspect of this broader problem—that is, how national digitalisation policy is discursively translated into institutional policy at the level of HEIs. We focus on three large, comprehensive research universities and on two of the profession-oriented university colleges. Based on our analysis of digitalisation policies, we conduct a comparative analysis to illuminate the translation of national policy ideas into the digitalisation policies of HEIs. Findings indicate that the what, the how and the why of Danish HEIs’ digitalisation policies do not come together in a coherent order of discourse. Rather, Danish HEIs catch on to singular elements of national policy ideas in an eclectic and fragmented manner. This might also be connected to the vagueness of definitions of digitalisation in national policy documents, which might be acting as an obstacle for more coherent translation processes at the HEI level.

Keywords
Digitalisation, higher education, translation, digital policy, university strategy, Denmark

Introduction
From the point of view of the Danish national government (2018) an up-to-date and proactive digitalisation of the public sector (which includes HEIs) is an important means to long-term societal growth and cohesion. Together with other Nordic countries, Denmark has been at the forefront of digitalisation as a result of a long-term process initiated by the government and influenced by international trends (Tømte et al., 2019). One key area of these developments has been the digitalisation of management tools used by government and organisations (Tømte et al., 2019; Vintergaard, 2018).

This article investigates the translation of digitalisation policy into higher education (HE) institutional policy. The relationships between dimensions at the macro (societal, international and global focus), meso (organisational and institutional focus), and micro level (individual focus) provide the broader context for our study (Khalid & Buus, 2014;
Tømte et al., 2019). The digitalisation policies of HEIs must address the political objectives laid out by government policy. We construe HEIs’ digitalisation strategies as examples of travelling policy ideas, and conduct a comparative analysis of the relevant national policy documents to illuminate the relation between policy ideas as they are expressed in the digitalisation policies of government and HEIs, respectively. Our research question is: How is national digitalisation policy discursively translated into institutional policy in higher education?

We trace the translation of digitalisation ideas from government policy to institutional strategies. The traces we follow are discursive ones, which implies a focus on written elements about digitalisation within HEIs. Our object of analysis is constituted by macro- and meso-level discourses, as we strive to understand the underlying mechanisms for meaning-making in the context of the translation process. We do not observe or document actual practices of digitalisation.

Our research has considerable empirical and theoretical relevance. Our article offers a better understanding of how national digitalisation policy is discursively translated into HEIs, advances theoretical knowledge on the linkages between national policies and institutional strategies, and provides a novel framework to understand HE policy development and implementation in HEIs.

**Theoretical foundations**

Our theoretical approach is inspired by Scandinavian neo-institutionalist perspectives on organisational translation processes (Czarniawska, 2012; Czarniawska-Joerges & Sevón, 1996; Røvik, 2016) and by discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2010), which identifies a loosely coupled stream of policy ideas or “organizational recipes” (Røvik, 2010) travelling across sectors, fields and organisations. These approaches fall under what is also known in organisational studies as “translation theory.”

**Understanding institutional change**

Translation theory has contributed considerably to the understanding of organisational change (Røvik, 2016). A recurring problem in the social sciences is that the implementation of decisions and policies rarely takes place as planned, and, so far, there is no consensus on why this is the case. According to proponents of isomorphism or imitation (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), organisations embedded in similar environmental contexts tend to adopt the same set of policy ideas, thus ending up resembling each other. Other empirical studies indicate that policies are often translated into a variety of local practices (Røvik, 2016). The orchestration of organisational change cannot, therefore, be understood as social engineering in a simple mechanistic manner, but must be considered as a complex process. Thus, the implementation of decisions does not follow a rational, logical model (Albæk, 1989), and there is a considerable gap between policy and practice (Aagaard, 2015). In other words, policy ideas do not simply “trickle down” (Aagaard, 2015) or “transfer” from source to recipient.

Discursively constructed policy ideas travel in and between organisations and, as they are translated, they are continually shaped, reshaped and transformed along the translation process (Røvik, 2016). This, in turn, implies local discursive constructions, enactments and practices. This translation process and its dynamic relationships with actors, norms and culture are at the core of discursive approaches to understand institutional change (Schmidt, 2010).
Opening up the mechanisms of translation
Translation theory has provided strong explanations as to why policy is rarely directly translated into practice, and scholars adopting a discursive or ideational approach have pursued a deeper understanding of how the transformation brought about by these translation mechanisms plays out in practice (Røvik, 2016; Thormar, 2019; Wahlström & Sundberg, 2018). The discursive turn of institutionalism allows for an inclusion of performativity, which emphasises the definitional power of discourses affecting ideas and organisations (Røvik, 2016; Schmidt, 2010). Borrowing from theories of linguistic structure and regularity, Røvik (2016) proposes that institutional translation of policy ideas and discourse follows one of three modes, what he calls the reproducing, the modifying and the radical mode. In the first, the recipient organisation attempts to replicate as closely as possible the original ideas and practices. The modifying mode is a mix of “replication and adjustment”, involving old and new elements in the translation process (Røvik, 2016, p. 297). This mode may involve omission of elements of the discourse transferred, and the policy idea may also be supplemented with additional elements (addition) that serve to explain and help convey the policy idea in the new context. In the radical mode, alteration is a key process, involving a significant transformation of the original policy ideas and discourses, “leading to the creation of a unique version in the recipient organization” (Røvik, 2016, p. 298). These three modes are analytically constructed ideal types that are rarely found in pure forms. Their application depends on a range of contextual features of the source organisation and source practices and ideas, and on the degree of similarity between source and recipient. Regardless of what mode of translation is at play, Czarniawska (2012, p. 27) rightly notes that “[t]he result of translation is always a change – a change in what was translated, and a change in the translator”.

Over time, policy ideas may become institutionalised and incorporated into organisational culture (Møller, 2017). However, the degree and type of translation, including the possibility for resistance and for the incorporation of opposing ideas, are highly related to pre-existing norms, values and cultural cognitive schemes or practices of the organisation at hand and of the actors constituting them (Gornitzka, 1999; Gornitzka & Maassen, 2000; Pinheiro et al., 2019). This means that the route from national policy level to institutional strategy and policy is not unidirectional. The Danish HE landscape is highly interlinked, and policy ideas may travel in all directions.

Higher education is a highly politicised field with much at stake (Undervisningsministeriet, 2019), and, in Denmark, where the vast majority of the HE being offered is publicly subsidised, the sector is regulated by diverse legitimate public interests and specific notions and practices of public accountability. Schou and Hjelholt’s (2018) study of the rollout of national digitalisation policies in Denmark from 1994 to 2017 tell the story of a gradual shift from an emphasis on participatory democratic ideals to an economic rationality stressing efficiency. Normally, national HE systems are considered to have a high degree of autonomy, decentralised expertise and discursive power, as well as strong professional norms at the level of institutional sub-units (Aagaard, 2015). These factors suggest that it might be less likely that national policy ideas would be translated directly into institutional practices at the HEI level. As Aagaard (2015) demonstrates in the case of Norway, HEIs often translate policy with large degrees of variation (Aagaard, 2015).

The translation of digitalisation policies in Danish HE has not been scrutinised systematically. Through a focus on current policies at the national and HEI level, this article explores the process of translation from national policy ideas into strategies of HEIs in relation to:
• arguments providing a rationale for digitalisation, in other words why digitalisation is important;
• discursive constructions of digitalisation illuminating the various meanings and conceptualisations of digitalisation, in other words what constitutes digitalisation; and
• ideas on digitalisation practices and methods, or how digitalisation should be carried out in practice.

In our analysis, we use Røvik’s (2016) translation operations of omission, addition, and alteration.

**Methodology**

To trace the discursive translation processes, we focus on written texts at the central government level as well as on selected HEIs’ discourses of digitalisation strategy, policy and educational practice. HE policy in this context is conceived as pertaining to discursive practices linking a variety of actors and structures across national and international contexts (Wahlström & Sundberg, 2018). Our methodological approach is partly inspired by Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis, which emphasises text as social practice (Fairclough, 2003). However, we do not have an overarching critical political ambition. Rather, we aim to describe and explain the why, what and how in the translation from national digitalisation strategy to the level of HEIs’ strategies.

The specific impacts that these written policies may or may not have on HEI practices is beyond the scope of this study. As policy ideas, the selected documents form the “institutional voice” that articulates in words the rationale and reasoning at national and institutional levels.

At the national level, we initially identified the main policy documents at the national level. We scanned all ministries for digitalisation strategic publications with relevance to HE. The selected three national policy documents represent the main HE policy-making authorities. The three policy documents are:

1. The overarching government strategy for the digitalisation of the Danish public sector (KL et al., 2016), developed by the Ministry of Finance and the national bodies of municipalities and regional authorities. This is the policy formulation at the highest national level.

2. Chapter 3 of the government’s “Strategy for Denmark’s digital growth”, developed by the Ministry of Industry, Business and Financial Affairs (Erhvervsministeriet, 2018). This chapter focuses on competence development and addresses the HE sector directly.

3. The national action plan for higher education, specifically focused on digital competence and digital teaching (Uddannelses- og Forskningsministeriet 2019a), formulated by the Ministry of Higher Education and Science after a dialogue initiated by a ministerial call for action focusing on technological upgrade of higher education. This document operates at the closest level to HEIs.

Although supranational bodies are important sources of policy ideas entering the national policy level (Brøgger, 2015; Konkov, 2019), we decided to exclude them, as the main purpose of this article is to open up the “black box” of the translation process from national to HEI level.

At the HEI level, we chose the case study approach for our research design (Flyvbjerg, 2004). We prioritised a high degree of variation across cases to provide a range of differing
translational trajectories. We initially investigated the websites of all Danish HEIs (N=14) and identified those (N=8) providing public access to their digitalisation strategy, either as an integrated part of their formal strategy or as a supplement to the latter.

We selected a total of five cases among the eight HEIs with a publicly available strategy. We analyse eight digitalisation policy documents from:

- three comprehensive universities; two are traditional research-intensive universities (UNI1 and UNI2 in the article) and one is a younger university (UNI3) with an emphasis on regional partnerships;
- two university colleges (primarily focused on teaching), a small (UNI4) and a large one (UNI5).

The selected HEIs enrol approximately half of the Danish student population.

The HEIs’ digitalisation policy documents analysed here are current at the time of writing (October 2020) and became effective between 2017 and 2019, around the same period as the national policies were published.

All national and HEI policy documents were coded systematically by both authors to map and compare thematic elements of digitalisation policy ideas at national and institutional levels.

Analysis
Analysis of national digitalisation policy

The government strategy for the digitalisation of the Danish public sector frames digitalisation as a fast-paced development that will hit society and to which the country must adapt (KL et al., 2016). Two strains of response are prevalent in this policy document. First, safety and trustworthiness need to be preserved at the societal level, thus indicating the development of cultural protective measures. The second element is that the development of digital solutions to support public and private enterprises need to be accelerated for the country to remain competitive; this relates more closely to the consolidation and expansion of a strong digital infrastructure.

A large part of the digitalisation strategy is based on earmarked initiatives that support growth and innovation in the private sector and help make administration more efficient. The focus is put on aspects such as data storage, efficient collection and sharing of data, and data security. A range of concrete initiatives are outlined, including fostering high-quality user experience for citizens, an efficient digital support system for economic growth, and a safety orientation highlighting competence development and accessibility in acknowledgement of Denmark’s trust-based societal foundations.

Economic growth continues to be the main driver of Danish digitalisation policy, and plays a central role in the “Strategy for Denmark’s digital growth” (Erhvervsministeriet, 2018) developed by the Ministry of Industry, Business and Financial Affairs. The ministry was one of the actors developing the earlier 2016 national strategy for the public sector above, and now is the sole author of the 2018 digital growth strategy. Chapter 3, titled “Digital competencies for all”, addresses digitalisation in the field of education and pays attention to citizens’ access to digitalised services and their digital competence development. The main focus, however, is on ensuring that private enterprises have access to labour with an adequate level of digital skills. This is motivated by an expected rise in labour market

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1. Denmark has eight universities in total, including two specialized universities. There are six university colleges.
demand for digital skills. There is no specific definition of what these digital skills are; rather, they are described interchangeably with STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) skills. Digitalisation in the HE sector is seen as an instrument to economic growth.

A specific education-oriented initiative emanating from this strategy is the “Technology Pact”, aimed at consolidating Denmark’s position as a digital frontrunner through STEM competence development. The digital growth strategy’s ideas behind this pact are strongly rooted in business life, with digitalisation considered a driving force for productivity and economic growth—in other words, a means to make the country richer. The rationale presented is that Danish society must use and develop technological and digital opportunities effectively and for the benefit of society, the economy, the business community, and the individual. The digital growth strategy also explicitly mentions digitalisation strategy development for the field of education as one of its initiatives.

When the national action plan for higher education was launched in 2019, the then-Minister for Higher Education and Science, Tommy Ahlers, declared in an official press release that:

Digital development has moved from a peripheral position to being part of everything we do. Our education needs to reflect that. We need to educate young people so that they can use technology to change the world because they understand its possibilities, but also be critical towards it and be attentive to its caveats […] Our ambition is to integrate an understanding of technology into all levels of education. (Uddannelses- og forskningsministeriet, 2019b, authors’ translation)

The national action plan marks a corrective to earlier national digitalisation policy ideas in that digital technology is construed not only as a STEM matter, but as an all-encompassing societal aspect pertaining to all disciplines. As stated in the action plan:

Not everybody needs to be able to code, but everybody needs to be able to decode and understand digital technology, and to take a critical stance to it and assess ethical considerations […]. (Uddannelses- og forskningsministeriet, 2019a, p. 5, authors’ translation)

The plan has two ambitions. First, the impact of digital technology needs to be addressed directly across disciplines, so that students can learn to apply digital solutions across fields. Second, digital technology should be used to improve HE teaching and learning quality and outcomes. Competence development of HE teachers is highlighted as key for these goals, along with the need for systematic knowledge production and evaluation focusing on “what works”.

Furthermore, the plan offers a new interpretation of HE digitalisation practices that spans across the whole of society, in a much more transversal way. The how of digitalisation moves beyond a narrow focus on STEM skills. This approach seems to acknowledge technoscientific and sociotechnical changes in the role of knowledge and technology in society, as identified by Jamison (2012). A technoscientific challenge arises from the increasing blurring of traditional disciplinary boundaries, thus creating a new interplay between science, knowledge creation and technology. A sociotechnical challenge is represented by the ubiquitous nature of new technologies, incorporated into otherwise non-technical areas of peoples’ lives, implying that technology spans across all areas of life (Jamison, 2012).

In Table 1, Table 2 and Table 3, we have summarised our thematic analysis of the three national policy documents along the dimensions of the why, the what, and the how of digitalisation.
At the *why* level (Table 1), we find that positive arguments of digitalisation as a means to growth, competence, and democratisation, co-exist with a risk-driven conceptualisation demanding digital development to prevent loss of security, jobs, and welfare. HE is considered interchangeably both as a tool to assure availability of employees with the digital capabilities demanded by the labour market, and as a potential source for the changes and ideas for tackling societal change, as well as a driver of such change.

Digitalisation is not explicitly defined in the national policies under analysis. However, it is strongly linked to STEM skills. The discursive constructions of the *what* of digitalisation (Table 2) show some ambivalence and contradictions. At one extreme, digitalisation is depicted as a threat to data security, to Danish welfare systems and competitiveness in internationally competitive markets, as well as to mental health, as illustrated by concerns over excessive digital activity amongst children. Sometimes digitalisation is more neutrally described as change, infrastructure, or skills, or as an integral element of current and future society. In the absence of direct definitions, related terms such as “digital development” and “digital skills” are used instead. A recurring finding is that digital development is often
described as a self-directed, irreversible movement, indicating a strong tendency towards technological determinism.

At the how level (Table 3), ideas about how to implement digitalisation in practice range from a narrow focus on STEM skills, to a broader focus on the need to train students in understanding digitalisation and developing digital skills across disciplines and fields.

Analysis of HEIs’ digitalisation policies
To gain a fuller understanding of policy ideas at the HEI level, we analysed the HEIs’ documents separately, and we coded their elements into macro, meso and micro levels. The majority of the HEI digitalisation policies were found to have more elements focusing on the meso level relative to the other levels. This means that issues of institutional organisation, administration and management were prevalent.

We then identified the institutional narratives forming the why, what and how of digitalisation and searched for the translation operations of omission, addition, and alteration as policy ideas are translated.

The first traditional, research-intensive university (UNI1) does not have a publicly available distinct digitalisation strategy. However, “digital” is mentioned 17 times in the university strategy document. Digitalisation is discursively constructed as a trending global challenge, digital technology is construed as something that must be exploited for specific purposes, and digital tools must support teaching and learning. The purpose of digitalisation is entirely related to workplace relevance, and thus the employability of university graduates. UNI1’s faculties hold a high degree of autonomy, and one faculty emphasises the ethical aspects of digitalisation in societal developments. This faculty’s policy ideas around digitalisation are intertwined with those in the field of research and external innovation partnerships.

The second traditional university (UNI2) decided in 2017 to invest 60 mil Danish Kroner (roughly 8 mil Euro) in an educational IT initiative that spans a five-year period and focuses on achieving higher educational quality through better use of virtual space to supplement face-to-face teaching and learning. Recently, UNI2 published its digitalisation strategy alongside a detailed roadmap for its implementation. The narrative that legitimises the strategy is marked by the discursive construction of digitalisation as a means to foster internal efficiency, better support of core activities, and increased internal and external benefit. Digitalisation is considered an external premise that the university must adapt to. Digitalisation needs to be addressed within (1) teaching and learning, (2) research, (3) work environment, and (4) university administration, each leading to a pathway of implementation.

The young comprehensive university (UNI3) has the most elaborated digitalisation strategy (published in 2018) of the HEI sample. Its digitalisation strategy unambiguously focuses on increasing the quality of the core services of the institution: teaching, research, and knowledge partnerships. A common trait of the UNI3 profile is its embeddedness in, and interaction with, surrounding society. Digitalisation as such is not considered a means to address societal problems, and, as a result, the digitalisation policy ideas are rather instrumental and inward-focused. The strategy names “reasoned digitalisation” as a guiding principle for implementation. Among the five HEIs, UNI3’s digitalisation strategy is the only one that defines digitalisation. The definition is wide and encompasses competencies, organisation, tasks, processes, and technologies.

Turning to the small university college (UNI4), the digital strategy is an addition to the overall institutional strategy for 2017–2020. It emphasises governance principles for digitalisation along with the thematic areas of digital development, user experiences and competence development. UNI4 discursively constructs an added value to the term “digital”, as a
broader and more complex approach when compared to information and communications technology (ICT). It balances between a focus on digital tools and a user approach, and the strategy highlights digital tools and the strategic use of data, artificial intelligence and automation as key areas, together with a perspective centred on the journey of the user and digital collaboration. Operationally, the strategy stresses a student perspective, as UNI4 intends to develop contemporary education based on innovative and reflexive practice aimed at raising students’ digital competencies, and at contributing to new knowledge and skills.

In the large university college (UNI5), digitalisation plays a rather prominent role in the overall institutional strategy for 2018–2020. The strategic direction is epitomised by the motto: "A human mark on a digitised world". The main institutional narrative does not frame digitalisation as an uncontested hegemonic force that nations have to follow to maintained competitiveness and economic growth. Rather, UNI5 intends to take on a responsibility to actively engage in the development of technology by educating students digitally and ethically. The ambition is to shape future developments around digitalisation, rather than just trying to keep up with it. At the time of writing, the operationalisation is still under development, involving a mapping of student, teacher, and administrative and managerial digitalisation potentials. Furthermore, students should develop their technological imagination and competencies so that they can use digital technologies and predict the consequences arising from the professional use of new technologies. Other prominent features include elements of critical and ethical thinking and the tradition of self-cultivation or Bildung, as well as skills-based focus on STEM and labour market demands.

**Discussion**

The discourses at the HEI level share a vagueness with the national policy discourses when it comes to defining digitalisation. Not much text is spent on clarifying what digitalisation is in a HE context. To some extent, national policy seems to establish digitalisation as a premise for all HEIs, and discursive constructions are not given much room. HEIs have their educational activities at the core of strategic discourse, and they seem to translate digitalisation policy into their pre-existing educational discourses centred on competence development, and on effective administrative support for teaching, research and administration. The only exception is UNI3, the young university, which, in its definition of digitalisation, omits much of the abstract argumentations surrounding digitalisation and of the sociotechnical challenge of ubiquity, and frames, instead, the digitalisation dilemma in a much more practical way.

Comparing the policy ideas of the HEIs with the national level along the why (Table 4), what (Table 5) and how (Table 6) dimensions, both similarities and differences are detected.

**Table 4** Policy arguments for digitalisation (the why) – national and HEI levels compared

| National digitalisation level | HEI level |
|------------------------------|-----------|
| Digitalisation as tool to participation & democracy | UNI2 |
| Means to more effective use of material and immaterial resources – leading to socio-economic growth | UNI4, UNI5 |
| Increased efficiency of administration and management | UNI1, UNI3, UNI4 |
| External international development necessitates action | UNI1, UNI4 |
| Need to fulfil demands of national labour market | UNI1, UNI2, UNI4, UNI5 |
One clear general omission at the level of HEIs is the negative threat defining digitalisation at the national level. One of the universities (UNI1) borrows elements of many of the different themes found in national policy (the *what*) and also tackles the policy idea of technological determinism, but challenges and alters it into a less pessimistic development that can be exploited for good. This mindset is widely reflected among HEIs’ argumentation for digitalisation (the *why*). Four out of five HEIs explicitly point to their own key role in relation to the Danish labour market. The HEIs seem to be seeking a market opportunity in positioning themselves as key players that hold the potential for providing the future workforce with much-needed digital skills. Perhaps negative storytelling does not sell well; so the narrative of HE benefitting the individual, the labour market, and society as a whole is highly emphasised as an addition in the translation process. All the core digitalisation arguments found at national policy level are also present within HEIs: however, they do not come in a neatly arranged, uniform manner as unaltered isomorphic translations mimicking “the original”. Rather, institutional digitalisation policy ideas seem somewhat messy and multifocal.

HEIs’ digitalisation policies rarely address techno-scientific issues. The reason might be that this may challenge their highly discipline-specific organisation. Instead, most of the HEIs interpret digitalisation in connection with sociotechnical arguments, and some call for Bildung, critical reflexivity and ethics as transversal learning objectives to be pursued due to

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**Table 5** Discursive constructions of digitalisation (the *what*) – national and HEI levels compared

| National digitalisation level | HEI level             |
|------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Fast-paced external change   | UNI1, UNI4            |
| Potential threat to culture (trust, safety, mental health) |                       |
| Competitive parameter        |                       |
| Infrastructure and support systems |                   |
| STEM skills                  |                       |
| Critical holistic technology-society understanding, digital Bildung | UNI1, UNI5 |
| Ubiquitous nature of new technologies |                   |

**Table 6** Policy ideas on digitalisation practice and methods (the *how*) – national and HEI levels compared

| National digitalisation level | HEI level             |
|------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Delivering on anticipated demand for STEM skills | UNI2 |
| Teachers need to learn to exploit digital technology in their education | UNI1, UNI4, |
| Students as future employees need to learn to use digital technology | UNI1, UNI2, UNI4 |
| Students as future employees need to learn to develop digital technology | UNI2, UNI5, faculty at UNI1 |
| Students as future employees need to learn to develop society and the digital technological elements therein | UNI2, UNI5, faculty at UNI1 |
| Digitalisation must be addressed in all disciplines and education levels | UNI3, UNI5 |
| Investment in technology to support higher education core tasks | UNI1, UNI3, UNI4 |
the ubiquity of digital technologies. By doing so, the HEIs perform an additional translation of overarching national policy, giving digitalisation a more context-specific touch.

Hints of what could materialise as radical translations were found, but it is difficult to carry out alterations when digitalisation policy ideas at the national level do not form a coherent order of discourse such as Fairclough’s (2003) conceptualisation of such an order as a network of interconnected meaning-making elements. Rather, different and sometimes conflicting policy ideas co-exist and are differently prioritised and balanced in the various policy documents. This is true at both the HEI and the national levels. Overall, the HEIs tend to translate from the national to the institutional level in a fairly eclectic and disconnected way.

This means that the translation of national digitalisation policy into HEIs’ digitalisation strategy is not a one-way street. Rather, there are a number of paths for local translation, resulting in variations amongst HEIs, which is in line with theoretical contributions that highlight why we do not find institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). However, reverse timing of institutional and national idea formulation may further undermine a one-way translation from national to institutional policy ideas, since policy ideas at institutional level may also translate to national digitalisation policy. This was, for example, intentionally orchestrated by the ministry responsible for HE via dialogical involvement mechanisms leaving room for HEI digitalisation policy ideas to affect national policy.

Conclusion

By means of an exhaustive empirical analysis of policy ideas at national and institutional levels of Danish HE, we investigate the discursive translation of national digitalisation policy to HEI strategy. The discursive argumentation constituting the ‘what’, the ‘why’ and the ‘how’ of HEIs’ digitalisation strategies are found to involve omissions, alterations and additions (Røvik, 2016) to the discourse at the national level. On the whole, the general lack of definitions of digitalisation and the co-existence of disparate meanings at the national policy level seems to be reflected in the eclectic manner in which Danish HEIs construct digitalisation in their strategies. The institutions perform a rather selective contextual translation, adding new/own meaning to policy ideas. One may argue that the many elements of digitalisation policy ideas are brought together in a translational dialogue without consistent re-contextualised translation into document-form.

Despite this eclectic and fragmented landscape, there are three distinct arguments that emerge from our study of digitalisation discourse at both national and HEI level:

1. a technoscientific argument, highlighting the need for an interdisciplinary approach to digital technology;
2. a sociotechnical argument, highlighting that digital technology permeates all areas of society, including HE;
3. a technodeterministic argument, conveying the idea that there is no other option for institutions and individuals than catching up with digitalisation as quickly as possible, if they do not want to be left behind.

In the future, it will be important to continue to assess how these arguments are further developed in the Danish HE sector and how they come together into patterns of interaction, integration or conflict, as the practical implications become clearer and discursive constructions are further developed. Another potential area for future research concerns the roles, demands, logics and interdependencies of different HE actors and stakeholders, as they articulate and implement digitalisation policy ideas.
HEIs should also consider adopting an explicit normative value-based stance to put into focus their societal role more actively, and to develop digitalisation policy ideas and practices that further consolidate their mission and their legitimacy in the broader society.

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