Higher education in the paradigm of speed

Student perspectives on the risks of fast-track degree completion

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ABSTRACT

Studies often highlight how standardisation and consent are manufactured through the European Bologna Process (Brøgger 2019; Gibbs et al. 2014; Lawn and Grek 2012). This article shows how students' conduct is still governed by multiple logics and dilemmas. The context for the article is the Bologna Process and the way it has been applied by the Danish government in the 2014 reforms that sought to fast-track the completion of student degrees. It analyses the impact of changes on students' conduct through a series of focus group interviews with students who were confronted with the new demands to speed up their progress through their degrees. To illustrate the complexity of this standardisation, the analyses are framed within theoretical ideas of 'risk' (Beck 2006) and 'translation' (Latour and Callon 1986).

KEYWORDS

Bologna Process, completion, European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), higher education reform, risk, speed, students

Navigating the sea of timeliness

After a visit to the keeper of the winds, Odysseus receives the gift of the winds of the universe in a carefully tied sack. Only one favourable tailwind is set free to help blow his ship safely home. But in the course of the night, the other winds escape from the sack with catastrophic consequences for Odysseus' fleet. Ships are cast here and there, resulting in numerous wrecks. In this article, we use the myth about the unfortunate journey of Odysseus as an image of the unforeseen and yet underexposed implications of the recent Danish Study Progress Reform (2014) and the economic incentives that were

expected to provide a 'tailwind' for the process of completing university students' degrees.

According to the competition-state thesis (Jessop 2002, 2004), late capitalist societies are characterised by an increasing number of higher education reforms aimed at shortening the time students take to complete their university degrees. In Denmark, this was the case when OECD statistics underlined that students in Denmark took markedly longer than students in other countries, and that the state could benefit economically by encouraging students to make a faster transfer to the labour market (OECD 2009). As can be seen from Figure 1, the so-called Study Progress Reform (2014) was designed to sanction students who delayed completion of their degree by more than six months (by cutting off public grants or expulsion from the university), whilst rewarding students who completed their studies before the prescribed time (with extra grants).

In 2017, less than three years after its implementation, the reform appeared to be an indisputable success. Statistics showed that the universities had almost already accomplished the objective of reducing the average study time by 4.3 months. In 2014, when the Study Progress Reform was implemented, graduates would, on average, take 11.6 months more than the prescribed time frame to complete their degrees. By 2017, this had been reduced to 6.7 months (see Figure 1).

The speed at which universities and students in Denmark have managed to adjust to the Study Progress Reform's requirements have rendered it a successful role model for other countries to follow in their attempts to make society fit for competition. Seen from society's point of view, if graduates move into the labour market earlier, they contribute to the economy for a much longer time, which is directly in line with the recommendations of the OECD. Furthermore, as a tool to fast-track the students' completion time, the Danish reform employed the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) of the European Bologna Process, which has already been implemented in many countries. Thus, the Danish reform might be considered an easy-to-follow example for other countries.

The Danish Study Progress Reform implied an intensification of the idea that university students are driven by economic motives for completing their university degree on time. This is also parallel to the developments in other European countries such as England. In 2012, the undergraduate tuition fee cap at English universities was raised from £3,375 to £9,000 per annum with the intention of governing student conduct by placing greater responsibility

Figure 1. The box displays an overview of the Danish Study Progress Reform from implementation to accomplishment. Sources: The Danish Ministry of Education and Research (UFM 2017, 2018).

The reform was introduced in 2013 and implemented in 2014.

It demanded that universities shorten the average completion time for degrees by 4.3 months by 2020, as compared to 2011. In 2011 the average delay was 13.2 months, and this number should be reduced to 9.1 months by 2020.

The reform required compulsory enrolment of all students in subjects and exams equivalent to 30 European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) points each semester. Students who failed to gain more than 30 ECTS points per semester would be punished with sanctions on their student grants (SU) or expulsion from the university, whereas students who completed the requirements before the prescribed time would be rewarded with extra grants.

In 2015, the requirement to pass 30 ECTS points each semester was removed, and the universities were given the opportunity to decide how to reduce the study time, but the political objective of an average reduction of the students' completion time by 4.3 months was maintained.

Several universities have introduced a requirement that students must pass a minimum of 45 ECTS credits per academic year.

From 2011 to 2017, the average time required to complete a university degree was reduced by 6.5 months. In other words, the average delay was reduced from 13.2 months in 2011 to 6.7 months in 2017. Consequently, the overall objective of the Study Progress Reform has been accomplished 3 years before time.

In 2019, a new funding system replaced the demands for fast completion within the Study Progress Reform. The new system rewards timely completion with 5 per cent of the basic public funding that the universities receive per student. The extra reward of 5 per cent per student is given to the universities, and not the individual students.

on the individual student to consider and determine expectations of debt against the financial benefits of studying (Brooks 2017; Esson and Ertl 2016). The shared political ideas of the student as driven by economic incentives may represent a general shift away from the emphasis on epistemological and existential motives, which were, roughly speaking, the ideal of the so-called welfare state university model (Forrester and Garatt 2016; Wright and Shore 2017). In the case of Denmark, the parties behind the 2014 reform argued that students did not take any interest in completing on time, since

students in Denmark get free tuition and a living allowance grant during their studies. In comparison to countries like England that charge tuition fees, it would therefore not be cheaper for the government if students completed their degree more quickly. Before the 2014 reform, students in Denmark took an average of six years to finish combined bachelor–master degree programmes, which 90 per cent of them pursue, and which the government argued should take five years.

Instead of introducing tuition fees, however, the Danish Study Progress Reform was designed to punish students who delayed completion of their degrees, by withdrawing the living allowance grant, while rewarding students who completed before the prescribed time, with extra grants. Hence, the Danish reform is an example of a quasi-marketised higher education model in which orthodoxies of the welfare state university model, such as free public education, including the maintenance of a basic living allowance from the state, are intertwined with key ideas of the competition state, such as the belief that students can, and must, be mobilised by economic incentives with the overall purpose of making society fit for competition (Cerny 1997; Hirsch 1997; Jessop 2002, 2004). This article is concerned with the reconceptualisation of the figure of the ideal student embedded in these intertwined ideas while foregrounding the students' perspectives.

The analysis revolves around a series of focus group interviews with students who were subjected to the attempts to speed up their degree completion times. The analysis shows that economic interests are not the only drivers of student conduct, but this argument is hardly novel. In order to show the multiple logics that govern student choices and the way they perceive risks to their education and futures, our analysis is framed within theoretical ideas of 'risk' as defined by Ulrich Beck and 'translation' as explained by Bruno Latour and Michel Callon. We advance a new theoretical concept of 'risk translation' in order to gain a more salient understanding of the dilemmas caused by reforms that are designed to speed up degree completion times and especially their consequences for students as learners. In doing so, we argue that the linear logic of the instrumental 'student economicus', which is employed in the Danish reform through the European Bologna Process and the ECTS, must be balanced by an idea of the 'student sociologicus', who continuously balances the reform's demand for timely completion against multiple other logics.

The remainder of this article is divided into two main sections. In section one, we introduce the interplay between the economic rationales of the ECTS and the Danish Study Progress Reform and present our theoretical

considerations about analysing its unforeseen implications for the students. In section two, we analyse a series of focus group interviews with students at the University of Copenhagen after the reform (2014–16). Framed within theoretical ideas of ‘risk’ (Ulrich Beck) and ‘translation’ (Bruno Latour and Michel Callon), we show how the success of the Study Progress Reform in fast-tracking student completion must be seen as the messy result of diverse considerations with diverse consequences for the students as learners.

Higher education in the paradigm of speed

The dictionary definition of the Danish word for progress (*fremdrift*) can be considered as something such as wind that moves itself or something else forward. Likewise, the name *Study Progress Reform* (*fremdriftsreformen*) indicates that a wind is set loose over the universities, which will help to move the students more quickly through their studies. In this vein, the reform’s idea of progress can be compared to the idea of a favourable tailwind in the myth about Odysseus’ visit to the keeper of the winds. However, as in the myth of Odysseus, the intention to release a favourable tailwind soon leads to a series of other winds – namely, the students’ emphasis on the freedom to follow the individual rhythms and diverse trajectories that they experienced before the reform.

On the verge of the implementation of the reform in 2015, we conducted a nationwide survey among 4,500 students in Denmark (Sarauw and Madsen 2016). From the survey, we learned that only 10 per cent of the students expected, metaphorically speaking, to have the wind of progress at their back and to move more quickly through their studies. At the same time, the one-wind logic of the reform was apparently confronted with multiple other logics governing student conduct before and at the time of the reform whereby the students expected that they would need to alter their approach to comply with the political demand for timely degree completion. As shown below (see Figure 2), these logics ranged from having sufficient time to become well-prepared for all classes and to participate in non-assessed learning activities to engaging with extracurricular activities, such as non-compulsory courses and social activities, part-time and voluntary work, internships, and studies abroad.

In other words, the survey showed that many students did not perceive the reform as a harmless and favourable tailwind that would automatically facilitate quicker progress through their studies without sacrifices. With

Figure 2. The box displays a selection of results from our nationwide survey among approximately 4,500 university students at eight Danish universities. The survey was conducted in spring 2015 (Sarauw and Madsen 2016).

echoes of the myth of Odysseus, they initially connected the reform to a risk of losing the trajectory that they had originally set for their journey in higher education, such as studying abroad or doing an internship during their studies. In line with tendencies in other countries (Brooks 2017; Macfarlane 2017), it was evident that the students in the survey felt forced to compromise the 'romantic' Humboldtian idea about freedom to learn (*Lernfreiheit*) and the right to prioritise one's own time.

This tendency is not new, and it is not restricted to the area of higher education and the European Bologna Process. According to recent works by the German sociologist Hartmut Rosa and others, an acceleration of time has taken place in the late capitalist societies (Alhadeff-Jones 2017; Gibbs et al. 2014; Hylland Eriksen 2001; Rosa 2015; Vostal 2016) whereby movement is no longer going towards an objective, but has become an objective in itself. According to Rosa and others, this acceleration of time is, however, a social construct, and in this article, we suggest that the ECTS used throughout the Bologna Process member countries and the way it has been employed in the Danish reform of 2014 to accelerate students' completion times represent such a construct. Before proceeding, we will briefly introduce the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), how it relates to the idea of the 'student economicus', and the implications it may have for students' experience of

time. Bruce Macfarlane has termed such experiences of time as ‘symbolic of loss, or a crisis, of trust’ whereby students are no longer trusted to regulate themselves or are assumed not to be acting in the interests of the wider public (Macfarlane 2017: 45). Macfarlane argues that students are asked to conform to a series of performance-based targets, which have become more and more detailed, leaving reduced room for professional judgement.

The Bologna Process and the sea of ECTS

The idea of measuring and managing students’ time is not an invention of the Danish Study Progress Reform. The European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) is already widely used as a tool to design, describe and deliver programmes in conjunction with outcome-based qualification frameworks among the countries of the European Bologna Process (1999) as well as many other countries throughout the world. The ECTS is defined by the European Commission as addressing ‘the time students typically need to complete all learning activities (such as lectures, seminars, projects, practical work, self-study and examinations) required to achieve the expected learning outcomes’ (EU 2015: 36).

In the Bologna Process, ECTS credits are counted on the basis of the workload required of students in order to achieve expected learning outcomes, and the credits are allocated to entire study programmes as well as to their components (such as modules, course units, dissertation work, internships and laboratory work). On an overall European level, credits are typically awarded to individual students after successful assessment of the intended learning outcomes (EU 2015: 36). On average, one ECTS credit point equals twenty-five to thirty working hours, and sixty credits are the equivalent of a full year of study or work. However, in a standard academic year, sixty credits would usually be broken down into several smaller components. In relation to the Bologna Process, it is often argued that the ECTS points help to make learning more student-centred, because students can transfer their ECTS credits from one university to another, and thus they are added up to contribute to an individual’s degree programme or training (EU 2015).

According to Ulrich Teichler’s (2003) study of the early stages of the European Bologna Process, the primary impetus for implementing ECTS was to enable European universities to compete for overseas students. In other words, Teichler argues, the implementation of ECTS was driven by economic interests rather than, for example, pedagogic ideas about students’

learning. It has also been argued that ECTS is not a neutral tool for enhancing (fee-paying) students' mobility within Europe and overseas (Gibbs et al. 2014; Macfarlane 2017) because, it implies a vocabulary for measuring academic achievement in a manner that potentially neutralises the importance of syllabus/content and the context of what is learned (Sarauw and Madsen 2016, 2017).

The student economicus

The Danish 2014 reform is an example of how the individual Bologna Process member states have taken advantage of the ECTS framework to achieve nationally defined objectives, which have a limited compatibility with the idea of enhancing students' mobility. Previously in Denmark, the ECTS was primarily used for financial regulation of the universities and other higher education institutions. Because students in Denmark do not pay fees, the eight Danish universities were financially supported individually according to the total annual ECTS activity of their students. In other words, financial support would be equivalent to the number of passed exams, and in Denmark, the ECTS system has therefore been criticised for lowering academic standards, since universities are rewarded for activity rather than quality achievement. The year 2014 represents an individualisation of that regulative power in that new rewards and sanctions for individual credit accumulation were featured as a means to incentivise students to choose the quickest possible trajectory.

As can be read from the first line of a political agreement behind the 2014 reform, it had a strong economic impetus: '[T]here is a need for a well-educated workforce and a well-functioning education system that can strengthen the Danish economy, competitive advantage and create jobs' (Danish Parliament 2013, our translation). With reference to the idea of a conjunction between the objective to quicken student completion ('a well-functioning education system') and economic growth ('the Danish economy' and 'competitive advantage'), the remainder of the agreement argued that incentivising students to achieve sixty ECTS credits a year would save the state 2.2 billion Danish crowns spent on public grants (SU). Furthermore, faster transition to the job market would increase the tax income of the state.

In the previous section, we argued that the ECTS vocabulary potentially encourages students to evaluate their academic achievement in terms of meeting standardised and decontextualised time requirements, rather than, for example, in terms of knowledge and insight, and regardless of whether

or not they are academically or existentially challenged and transformed. In the case of the 2014 Danish reform, compulsory enrolment of all students for exams corresponding to sixty ECTS credits a year (a full year's workload) and sanctions for failure or delay in obtaining thirty ECTS credits (six months' workload) exemplify how the ECTS framework is used by an individual member state to achieve nationally defined objectives. Furthermore, the ECTS framework is linked to a generalised idea about the 'student economicus' – that is, a student who is primarily motivated by economic incentives such as rewards (with extra grants) for completion before the prescribed time and by punishment for delay (by cutting off public grants and expulsion from the university if they fail a given number of exams). 'Student economicus' is our paraphrasing of the concept of the 'homo economicus', or economic man, which is used in economic theories that portray humans as consistently rational and narrowly self-interested agents who usually pursue their subjectively defined ends in a context of competition for scarce resources. In line with a range of theories that question the Nobel Prize-winning theory of the 'homo economicus' (Becker 1976; Friedman 1953), our early-stage survey among students in Denmark after the reform (Sarauw and Madsen 2016) showed the limitations of this logic.

Firstly, the survey unveiled a tension between the economic incentives that were supposed to drive the reform and the students' motives for engaging with and completing their studies. We found that the majority of students were led by an explorative educational interest that would overshadow the narrow self-interest of the 'student economicus' and contradict the reform's demand that all students complete their education at the same pace. Secondly, we found a need to consider wider social interest and engagement among students. Rather than focusing exclusively on their own success, the students in the survey were often motivated by the social aspects of the study environment, and in many cases, the study environment appeared crucial for the students' motivation and their completion times. In other words, many students indicated that they were governed by logics that were not compatible with the idea of the 'student economicus'. Thirdly, from a research perspective, the survey also challenged the tendency in contemporary research to foreground how consent and legitimation is manufactured through the standards and infrastructures of the Bologna Process (Brøgger 2019; Gibbs et al. 2014; Lawn and Grek 2012). Clearly the reform would have severe implications for the students, but in contrast to the above research, our survey showed that policy prescriptions and economic interests were not the

only drivers of student conduct. Instead, we argue that students' navigation must be seen from a perspective that foregrounds how they developed and framed their priorities and choices within the context of a wider community comprising multiple other logics. In our analysis, we employ the concept of 'student sociologicus' to provide this wider perspective on how students negotiate the dilemmas they experience in relation to the increased demand for fast completion.

Risk dilemmas and risk translations

Using the metaphor of Odysseus' visit to the keeper of the winds, we intend to analyse what happens to students' navigation when they realise winds other than economic rationality have escaped from the sack and find they must also engage with them if they want to move forward with their studies. For that purpose, we will refer to what the German sociologist Ulrich Beck has termed 'risk logics'. In short, Beck suggests that 'risk' should be understood as a construction, in that a perceived threat from a possible future leads to confrontation, evaluation and choice in the present (Beck 2006: 63–75). According to Beck, the concept of risk encapsulates a duality of, on the one hand, *virtuality*, understood as an idea of a threatening future not yet realised (and perhaps never will be), and, on the other hand, *reality*, understood as a directional basis for actions and decisions in the present.

In the context of the Danish Study Progress Reform, the effect of the new demand for fast completion is a *virtual* risk to the students' actual priorities and choices while the *real* depends on the extent to which the students identify with the reform's intended 'risk logic' (Rasborg 2012). In other words, the students would have to identify with the role of the 'student economicus' and accept the risk of economic sanctions and/or expulsion for delay as a meaningful incentive to comply and adapt to a faster pace of study. The French sociologist Bruno Latour's concept of 'translation' provides a platform that is sensitive to the students as actors within a wider social context, which is co-constitutive of their perception of the 'risks' implied in the reform and the increased demands for fast completion.

According to Latour (Latour 1987; Latour and Callon 1981), each individual actor can, and always will, translate a perceived risk based on their own premises, expectations and agendas, reflecting an individual's particular life circumstances. In our study, the concept of 'translation' provides a theoretical framework for challenging the political assumption behind the

reform that it is possible to foresee and control how a given risk (in this case, the risk of delay) will function as a corrective in relation to a specific behaviour. 'Translation' also correlates with our analytical emphasis on the 'student sociologicus' and the idea of a student whose trajectories are multidimensional and repeatedly informed, constructed and negotiated in diverse social settings. Employing the concept of 'translation', we foreground the possibility that the intended risk (virtuality) of the reform may gain new content and may potentially trigger a series of entirely different actions (reality) than expected by the political agreement.

Analysis: Students' dilemmas and risk translations

The concept of risk translation allows us to illuminate and reflect upon important, underexposed implications of the Danish Study Progress Reform for students' lives and the outcomes of participating in higher education. Below, we give a series of examples of students' translations of the reform's intended risk logic. In the analyses, we show how the risk logic is often balanced against a series of other risk logics, leading to new navigation patterns that were not foreseen by the political agreement on the Study Progress Reform. The analyses are based on a series of focus group interviews with Computer Science and Ethnology students at the University of Copenhagen. All interviews were conducted by Laura Louise Sarauw during 2014–2016. The focus groups consisted of four to six students. The interviews were conducted once per semester, with the same cohort from autumn 2014 to autumn 2016.¹ The interviewees were all first-year students in 2014, when the Danish Study Progress Reform was on the verge of implementation, while the quotes that we analyse in this article are all from autumn 2015 and spring 2016.²

The students in the focus groups were all exploring different ways to minimise the risk of losing what they held dear in their study life before the increased demands for fast completion, and in our analyses, we highlight three examples of students who strongly represent important differences within the sample. The two study programmes were chosen with the aim of representing students from two presumably different study communities with two seemingly different approaches to studying and completing their studies within a given time frame. For example, Computer Science students have high job security, both during their studies and after graduation, and the student population is dominated by males. In contrast, Ethnology is a typical

humanities programme with females comprising the majority of the student population, and with a route to the labour market that is less straightforward.

We introduce Students A, M and K below. All three were first-year students in 2014, when the Study Progress Reform was first implemented. The three students are real people (not composites) selected from a total sample of sixteen interviewees, and in our analyses, they represent different ways of ‘risk translating’ the reform’s demand for faster completion, none of which could be foreseen by the political agreement.

The analyses are neither exhaustive nor representative for all students because, firstly, they revolve around students from only two different study programmes at the same university, and secondly, the quotes are selected with the specific purpose of shedding light on the unforeseen ‘risk translations’ performed by the students’ narratives when the ‘risk logic’ of the Study Progress Reform is balanced against other risks and risk logics. The examples should therefore be read with the understanding that the analytical focus on ‘risk translation’ may draw a picture of students’ navigation after the reform, which may not be generalised for all students, as driven by a ‘negative dialectic’ – that is, the need to minimise the risk of failure and delay. To underline how the students’ risk translations relate to their understanding of student life and what they hold dear in the local study environment, we introduce each of the analyses with a description of each programme. The descriptions are based on the students’ narratives.

Computer Science: The risk of engagement

According to the students in our interviews, Computer Science has a well-functioning study environment with a strong tradition for student-driven initiatives, which was valued and experienced by the students in our interviews as a primary motivation for learning. In the interviews, they tellingly contrasted their own study with ‘the competitive study culture at the Law Department and at CBS [Copenhagen Business School]’. They emphasised how the study environment for Computer Science students was characterised by a ‘super-good social space’, where everyone ‘sits around in school after class and discusses group projects and works on them together’. In other words, what they seemed to value was the non-competitiveness of the social space.

As an explanation for this, they pointed to, among other things, the student instructors – that is, the older students who teach in their lab hours. According to the interviewees, the instructors had an essential, positive role

because they were accessible on a more informal level, as well as beyond the usual class time, so that, for example, one ‘can contact them in the canteen and get everything sorted out by someone who actually knows the stuff and feels like teaching it to you’. The example we analyse in this section will therefore revolve around the students’ relation to the student instructors, and how the Study Progress Reform seemingly puts this relation at risk.

‘Who dares to sacrifice their own studies?’

According to the interviewees, the ‘super-good social space’ is challenged by the Study Progress Reform’s increased demand for fast completion. In the quote below, a first-year student in Computer Science, sees the reform as a risk to students’ voluntary engagement:

One of the places where I think the Study Progress Reform will shoot itself in the foot is that there will no longer be someone who has the time to be an instructor, because you have to complete your study in half the time. There is nobody who dares to sacrifice their own studies in order to teach others about what they learned last year. (Student A, first-year student in Computer Science, male, interviewed in autumn 2015, our translation)

In the quote, Student A presents a risk translation in which the idea that students will no longer choose to become instructors is seen as a main risk of the reform. In that way, we see how the risk logic of the reform, namely, the risk of delay to the individual student, is balanced against another risk that seems just as precarious for Student A, namely, the risk that students will no longer engage in ways that benefit others. As described above, the instructors are valued by the first-year students because they represent a meeting point between the formal and informal, the academic and social, which, in the eyes of the interviewees, guarantees an essential knowledge transfer between batches of students, specifically first-years and more experienced students. In the quote, we see how Student A perceives participation in a wider social and academic community as becoming more of a risky business – something that one needs to avoid unless one is willing to ‘sacrifice one’s own studies’.

The above risk is in contrast to the expectations of the political agreement regarding students’ risk navigation (Danish Parliament 2013). The political agreement expects students to isolate the effects of the new demand for fast completion from other values that they find important for their studies. Hence, employing the concept of risk translation to the empirical material helps us

to see how the reform's apparently harmless and, according to the political agreement, manageable demand for fast completion seems to create new risk logics when introduced into students' daily lives. According to Student A's risk translation, the Study Progress Reform presents a risk of promoting a very individual-orientated study culture – that is, a culture that he perceives as radically different from the existing and much more community-orientated culture where 'people help one another' and where the transmission of traditions and study completion are perceived as being part of a collective responsibility, symbolised by the revered student instructor system. The tendency towards individualisation is also key in our nationwide survey (Sarauw and Madsen 2016) referred to at the beginning of this article in which 42 per cent of the student respondents expected to reduce their engagement in social activities during their studies. In Student A's case, it becomes evident that he sees the (in his interpretation, selfish) 'student economicus' logic being internalised by his fellow students. We may therefore argue that Student A problematises how his fellow students uncritically accept the *one-risk logic* (rewarding faster pace and punishing delay) of the Study Progress Reform as the principal risk when navigating the sea of the ECTS.

Ethnology: The risks of contemplation and boldness

In general, the students we interviewed in Ethnology can be described as having what Damsholt et al. (2008: 15) called a development-orientated study pattern – that is, students often chose the study programme out of an academic interest and/or a desire to make a difference to other people, and in general, the students give the impression that they spend more than thirty-seven hours a week on study-related activities. They expected their participation in the study programme to support continuous disciplinary as well as personal development, and the students did not generally discriminate between study activities and leisure.

It seemed a common experience among the students that they 'are cared for [by the teachers] in a way that makes the world and the university less harsh'. Moreover, the students found that their 'teachers have a great love for their discipline, for each other and for us'. However, many desired a reduced focus on exams and competency goals as, in their experience, that was what the teachers headed towards 'from the first day'. The students in the group interview demanded a 'more liberal structure for our own projects and increased time to read and go into greater depth and discuss'. The risk

translations, which we analyse in the following two examples, are therefore about different attempts to save what they understand to be the freedom and time to go into greater depth despite the demand to increase the speed of their studies.

'I have perhaps become a bit rebellious'

In the quote below, Student M, a second-year student in Ethnology, sees the increased demands for fast completion brought about by the Study Progress Reform as the risk of having less time for contemplation, and therefore a potentially lower learning outcome. On the other hand, as she explains she does consider taking advantage of the new rules on transferring ECTS credits (the so-called 'forced merit')³ to gain more time for her bachelor project, the major thesis that all students in Denmark have to hand in at the end of the first three-year cycle:

I have perhaps become a bit rebellious in relation to the new regulations because I would like to enjoy this study. I have not suffered until now, but I would like to have more time to go into greater depth. I cannot plan what will happen in ten years, and I cannot see how the job market will look, but at the same time, I just simply need to look forward. . . . I have decided what I will write about in my bachelor [project], and I could actually use some of those credits from Tibetology, which I studied before. I have considered using them in a way whereby I do not go on an exchange [study abroad] and I do not take more elective courses, instead doing some work that is relevant so that I am ready for my bachelor [project]. (Student M, second-year student in Ethnology, female, interviewed in spring 2016, our translation)

Student M's narrative contrasts the demands for faster completion and the pressure to 'look forward' that she sees as inherent to the reform with her wish to enjoy her studies, which is equated with 'having more time to go into greater depth'. In line with the former example from Computer Science, we see how Student M positions the Study Progress Reform as a risk or maybe even a hindrance to what she experiences as an essential value of her study life – in this case, 'having more time to go into greater depth'. But in contrast to Student A in the previous example, Student M considers how she can actively preserve this value, or at least some of it, while not sailing completely against the risk logic dominating the political agreement.

In order to take back the time that she risks losing because of the Study Progress Reform – that is, in order to prepare better for her bachelor project – Student M considers transferring some of the ECTS credits that she has earned in her earlier studies in Tibetology and use them towards her Ethnology degree. In contrast to the ‘student economicus’, as assumed by the political agreement, Student M does not want to transfer her previously earned ECTS credits in order to finish more quickly and receive an economic reward. Instead, she wants to take advantage of her earned credits to go into her research material in more depth and to consider her future, while at the same time keeping her completion time at the required speed. In other words, Student M translates the reform into a kind of counter-logic, where she plans to recapture the values that the reform has put at risk.

With her risk translation, Student M turns the reform’s intended risk logic completely on its head, in that she shifts around what would count as, respectively, value and risk. As we found in the political agreement, high speed was the objective or key value, but here, M posits slowness as the main objective or value, with speed as the potential risk, because the faster pace, in her eyes, implies a risk of superficial learning. For Student M, this shift between risk and value implies a counter-logic about the necessity of becoming ‘a bit rebellious’. That is, she decides to transfer ECTS credits gained on a previous study programme to save her having to use time on earning more credits and give herself time to go into her current interests more deeply. However, by transferring the ECTS credits from her previous programme, she also cuts herself off from the possibility of, for example, pursuing study abroad or extra elective courses, which she could have benefitted from.

‘More at stake’

As we have seen in the previous examples, the students’ risk translations are, to a large extent, characterised by an understanding that social engagement and academic involvement are under threat. In the example below, we show how the intended risk logic of the political agreement also tends to mutate as the students consider how adventurous they dare to be in relation to a study abroad. In the quote, we meet Student K, a second-year student in Ethnology. Student K does not question if slowness is a primary risk, but the reform makes her reconsider her own proneness to risk. As she explains here, the reform represents an actual risk in her study life because it makes her feel that she has ‘more at stake’:

It has always been important for me to have a period of study abroad, and it was an essential objective to learn and speak a decent level of Spanish. But then I found out the other day that the study abroad agreement that the Ethnology Department has in Spain requires that you take an exam in Spanish. And you have to take a language test before you go down there. . . . I think that now, all of a sudden, there is a lot at stake. One thing is that you need to communicate socially in Spanish, and you can think that this is a little difficult in the beginning and it is a difficult task. But I think there is a lot more at stake in that there are also consequences by simply not being the best in this discipline. (Student K, second-year student in Ethnology, female, interviewed in spring 2016, our translation)

In the quote, Student K explains how the increased demand for fast completion has made her change her navigation pattern in that the planned period of study abroad that she has always dreamed of is suddenly associated with more risk than she is willing to take. According to Student K, there were various risks connected with going abroad before the reform. She describes these risks as having to ‘take an exam’ and ‘communicate socially’ in Spanish, but with the new sanctions for delay that were introduced with the reform, the original plan to develop her language and study skills though a year of study in Spain must be reconsidered. In Student K’s risk translation, the increased risk of delay, which follows from the sanctions of the reform, means that there is now ‘more at stake’. This leads her to minimise the risk of delay by choosing the safest path – to stay home.

Student K’s decision not to ‘run the risk’ of a period of study abroad resonates strongly with the responses from students in our nationwide survey (Sarauw and Madsen 2016), with 25 per cent expected to opt out of an already planned internship. In this context, Student K’s narrative suggests that only students who perceive of themselves as top students who can complete the ECTS requirements on time will be bold enough to study abroad after the reform.

Student K’s narrative also emphasises a common point in the examples we have analysed in this article: her problem is not related to the local rules about exchange visits in the Ethnology department. The same goes for Students A and M, whose conflicts of interest are not about local requirements of their study programmes. In all three examples, it is the increased demand for fast completion that seems to generate a sense of risk as an *a priori* foundation for their educational navigation. In other words, the Study Progress Reform heightens their perception of the risk involved in following

their own ideas of what makes their time at university worthwhile. Before the reform, the possibility of prolonging the period of study – for example, by postponing an exam until the next semester – served as a kind of safety valve for potentially risky choices about studying more deeply or taking a semester to study abroad.

Discussion: Counteracting or complying with the paradigm of speed

On the previous pages, we argued that the political agreement behind the Danish 2014 reform implied a reductive ideological understanding of the student – the so-called ‘student economicus’ – who is driven by economic incentives, such as a cash bonus for fast completion. We found that the agreement is based on a one-risk logic that focuses exclusively on the possible benefits from speeding up the students’ completion times, such as savings on the public grants budget and the economic benefits related to accelerating graduates’ progression into the labour market.

However, as in the myth of Odysseus’ visit to the keeper of the winds, our analyses show that what was intended to be a favourable tailwind has also raised a range of other logics as the students adapt the reform to the realities of their studies. In contrast to the political one-wind logic, the students’ have multiple doubts about whether they can safeguard the ideas and visions that governed their participation in their studies before the reform. Various rationales are at stake in the students’ narratives. Notably, they all emphasise the risk of losing the freedom to learn (*Lernfriehiet*) and the right to prioritise one’s own time – either by contributing to a larger social and disciplinary community, as in the case of Student A, or by taking the time to go into greater depth with the bachelor’s dissertation, as in the case of Student M. Student K was also navigating her time measured in the ECTS to try to work out how to include a period of study abroad in her bachelor degree, even though it would not add anything to her ECTS count.

Concluding remarks: The student economicus and the messy risks of education

This article explored how the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) was adopted as a powerful agent to hasten degree completion in the Danish Study Progress Reform (2014). We have also examined its implications for

students' trajectories through academia. Our analyses of the Danish reform should be seen in light of a general tendency within the European Bologna Process, through which consent and legitimation is manufactured through standards and infrastructures such as the ECTS (Brøgger 2019; Gibbs et al. 2014; Lawn and Grek 2012; Nielsen and Sarauw 2017). Consideration should also be given to wider sociological perspectives (Alhadeff-Jones 2017; Hylland Eriksen 2001; Rosa 2015; Shahjahan 2018; Vostal 2016) that suggest an acceleration of time has taken place in the late capitalist societies, with movement becoming an objective in itself. According to Rosa (2015), today's institutions and practices are marked by the 'shrinking of the present', a decreasing time period during which expectations based on past experience reliably match the future.

These tendencies potentially conflict with the traditional 'Humboldtian' approach to education as well as new student-centred perspectives' emphasis on student autonomy, personal development, and explorative learning (Baeten et al. 2010; Biggs and Tang 2011; Entwistle 2009; Ulriksen 2014). Our interviews, however, illustrate that a multiplicity of logics still govern students' choices and trajectories after the reform. In other words, the demand that students should gain as many ECTS credits as fast as possible does not outweigh other educational interests, such as existential challenges, personal development and the pursuit of knowledge and insight.

Inspired by Odysseus' mistaken belief that he could ensure his own progress by containing the winds of the universe in a sack, we have pointed out how the students translate the risk logic of the reform in a series of unforeseen ways – translations that question the extent the straightforward instrumental orientation will actually succeed in replacing the formative orientation when it comes to the students' understanding of the underlying purpose of participating in higher education. Ultimately, however, the students in our interviews all comply with the political logic. But they also gave us a clear impression of what has been 'lost in translation': their drive towards exploring a number of formative and non-straightforward trajectories that they originally saw as constituent to the quality of their studies. Instead, they all take a more instrumental, strategic and calculating approach to navigating their education, which is less bold, less exploratory and less risky. Ironically, even the rebellious Student M, who actively sought more time to go into greater depth in her studies, ends up choosing a safe trajectory – that is, having sufficient time to deliver her bachelor thesis on time.

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Notes

1. All interviews were conducted in Danish and subsequently transcribed in full. All quotes analysed in this article are our translations from the original Danish transcripts. The first sample of interviews (Autumn 2014–Autumn 2015) served to inform the questions for our nationwide survey mentioned at the beginning of this article (Sarauw and Madsen 2016), whereas the final samples (spring 2016) served to explore the findings of the survey in more detail. Parts of the material that we present in this article have previously been published in a Danish journal for higher education studies (Sarauw and Madsen 2017).
2. Unfortunately, we have no quantitative follow-up survey that would display the extent to which the students actually followed the expectations they had regarding changing their conduct after 2015. The analyses in this article will concentrate on our qualitative follow-up research.
3. According to the new reform, the ECTS follows the individual student, not the programme. Hence, when, for example, a student shifts from one programme to another, the ECTS credits the student has already accumulated are automatically transferred, as long as they are deemed relevant to the new programme.

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