



Between Tradition and Experiment: The Idea of a New University

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Abstract • From the mid-1960s to the mid 1970s, three new universities were established in Denmark: Odense (1966), Roskilde (1972) and Aalborg (1974). Until then only two universities existed in Denmark: Copenhagen (1479) and Aarhus (1928). Located on the outskirts of the major cities, the new institutions played an important part in reforming and transforming higher education in Denmark. The youngest university, Aalborg University, is approaching its 50th anniversary. This is an opportunity to take a step back and examine the university in long-term perspective. In this article, I investigate the discussions and expectations concerning the establishment of the university in the period 1958–1974. Based on contemporaneous debates in the regional newspaper *Aalborg Stiftstidende* and interviews with several key figures, the study seeks to analyze the underlying ideas and ideals which characterized the discussion by asking the following questions: What was the projected purpose of the new university? What ideals were expressed in the debate? In the last part of this article, I will reflect on the historiographical developments in the history of the university. In recent years, several new approaches have expanded the field and made visible new aspects of the institutions' histories. I will discuss why a focus on the ideas, ideals and expectations of the university, and thereby of the university as a knowledge institution, is essential to include in a study of its history.

Keywords • university, university centre, knowledge ideals, circulation of knowledge, Denmark

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Not long after the 44-year-old Carl Willum Hansen (1914–2002) was appointed principal of the newly established Aalborghus State Gymnasium in 1958, he began to argue for university education in Northern Jutland. “Where should the student of 1970 study?” asked Willum Hansen in the regional newspaper *Aalborg Stiftstidende* during the autumn of 1960.¹ With his article, Willum Hansen wanted to redirect focus to the lack of educational opportunities in the area, and to pitch the idea of a university in one of Denmark’s northernmost parts, Aalborg – more than 400 km from the capital Copenhagen. This idea would later create fundamental changes not only in Aalborg, but in the entire North Jutland region.

One of Willum Hansen’s main conclusions was that more and more people from the region were passing the high school diploma (*da. studentereksamen*). There was, therefore, a need to provide qualified labour for the growing gymnasium. Statistics showed that, over the course of 5–6 years, the number of students would almost

¹ Carl Willum Hansen, “Hvor skal studenten anno 1970 studere?” *Aalborg Stiftstidende*, September 16 (1960), 10. *Aalborg Stiftstidende* (since 1999 *Nordjyske Stiftstidende*) was (and still is) the largest regional newspaper in North Jutland. All Danish newspaper headlines and quotations in the text have been translated into English. The Danish headlines and quotations are always placed in their entirety in the footnote. From here on, all translations from Danish to English are my own.

double, and if action was not taken quickly, there would soon be a shortage of teachers and institutions.² The expected increase in the number of students would also create another problem. At the time, the existing programs at Denmark's two universities in Aarhus and Copenhagen did not have the capacity to educate all the new prospective students. Therefore, an expansion not only of the gymnasiums, but also a development of the higher education system was necessary for the northern region, as well as for other parts of Denmark, to meet these emerging requirements.³

Another important reason for creating more and better educational opportunities was a fear of 'brain drain'; that the region's young people simply moved away from home to get an education and subsequently became so established in the new places that they did not return. The geographical location of higher education in Denmark was very much on Willum Hansen's mind. As principal, he could see how a large number of young people from Northern Jutland, who otherwise had the skills for higher education, were held back by the region's lack of educational opportunities.⁴ The ever-increasing number of students should, he argued, have an opportunity to continue their studies in their home region. Furthermore, he saw the university project as an important part of regional development and did not think that there should be too great a difference between the opportunities in the outskirts of Denmark and in large cities such as Aarhus or Copenhagen. In the chronicle, Willum Hansen stated that "[the] competition between metropole and province need not be harmful or ridiculous, and local patriotism can be a beautiful expression of the feelings you have for the place where you live and work."⁵

One consideration was the practical circumstances concerning the establishment of a university. Another, which Willum Hansen stressed at the end of the article, was his idea about the future university: what kind of a university should it be? According to Willum Hansen the new university should embrace the natural sciences, law, medicine, and the humanities. "People do not live on bread alone," he wrote, and he continued, that in practice, "one experiences time and time again how aspects of the work that apparently have no invited connection can have a mutually fruitful effect."⁶ In other words: Willum Hansen wanted a traditional university located in the working-class town.⁷

Willum Hansen was far from the only one in North Jutland who dreamed of developing educational opportunities in the late 1950s. At the same time as he aired his thoughts on the university for the first time, a group of business people and politicians named the 'Business Council of North Jutland' (*da. Nordjyllands Erhvervsråd*) had begun to work purposefully to improve the educational opportunities in the region,

2 Hansen, (1960), 10.

3 Ibid.

4 "Det fjerde universitet bør placeres i Aalborg," *Aalborg Stiftstidende*, September 18 (1963), 10.

5 "Konkurrencen mellem byer og egne behøver ikke at være skadelig eller latterlig, og lokalpatriotisme kan være et smukt udtryk for de følelser, man nærer for det sted hvor man bor og virker." Hansen, (1960), 10.

6 "I praksis oplever man gang på gang hvordan sider af arbejdet, der tilsyneladende ikke har nogen indbydes forbindelse, kan virke gensidigt befrugtende." Hansen, (1960), 10.

7 Jes Adolphsen, *AUC's 10 års jubilæum: I satte os i jeres baner. Interviews med 19 vigtige personer i AUC's historie* (Aalborg: Aalborg University Press, 1984), 14–15.

and especially for the establishment of several higher education institutions in Aalborg.⁸ Unlike Willum Hansen, they had a strong focus on improving technical education. Their primary objective was to establish a department of the Danish engineering academy in Aalborg. Despite the different approaches to the development of the educational opportunities, Willum Hansen was soon integrated in the work of the business council.

On September 1, 1974, fifteen years after Willum Hansen had shared his thoughts on university education in North Jutland, Aalborg University Centre was inaugurated. How did the discussions about the future university develop? What characterized the debate? What expectations were there in the local area, which was known to be a regular working-class town? In this article, I will narrate the very early history of Aalborg University from its inception as an idea in the late 1950s to its inauguration in the autumn of 1974. I investigate the discussions and expectations concerning the establishment of the university centre that were initiated by Willum Hansen's chronicle. Based on the regional newspaper *Aalborg Stiftstidende* and interviews with several key figures, the study seeks to analyse the underlying ideas and ideals which characterised the discussion about the university in Aalborg.

From the beginning, *Aalborg Stiftstidende* became an essential arena for discussing a possible university in North Jutland. Supporters and opponents regularly aired their arguments for and against the location of a university in Aalborg. In this article, I have particularly focused on submissions from some of the leading players in the Business Council of North Jutland, as this was where many ideas and ideals about a possible future university were presented. However, I also include submissions from students and people outside the business council. Although the university discussion also greatly interested the high school students in Aalborg, they did not submit many discussions to the newspaper, or they have not been published.

In connection with Aalborg University's 10th and 25th anniversary, a number of interviews were conducted with several people from the circle around the Business Council of North Jutland, the planning group for Aalborg University Centre, as well as the interim board, who managed the university centre until the first university election in 1976. These interviews are central for understanding the background of Aalborg University.⁹

In the second part of the article, I will reflect on historiographical developments within the field of university history. I discuss why focusing on the ideas and ideals of the university is essential to include in a study of university history and how it can contribute to a development of the field. In doing so, I also include perspectives from the history of knowledge. The history of knowledge has gained ground in several research fields in recent years, and has inspired new perspectives, for example on the history of education. In the second part of the article, I will give some examples of how the history of knowledge can be used to shed new light on university historical research.

⁸ The Business Council of North Jutland later changed its name to North Jutland Committee (*da. Nordjyllandsudvalget*). Niels Østeraas, *En pressionsgruppe med succes: Historien om Nordjyllandsudvalget for højere læreanstalter* (Aalborg: Aalborg University Press 1984), 7; Adolphsen, (1984), 10–13.

⁹ Adolphsen, (1984); Peter Ditlev Oldenburg, *Glimt fra nordjysk universitetshistorie gennem 40 år* (Aalborg: Aalborg University Press, 1999), 190–91.

The idea of a new university

From the mid-1960s to the mid 1970s, three new universities were established in Denmark: Odense University in 1966, Roskilde University Centre in 1972, and finally, Aalborg University Centre in 1974. The establishment of the new Danish universities were part of a broad international phenomenon that was connected with the development of the welfare state in several northern European countries.¹⁰ During the 1960s, a reform of higher education was discussed in large parts of the western world.¹¹ Since the 1960s, hundreds of new research institutions were established across the globe.¹² Often these institutions constituted experimental spaces, with fresh takes on both curriculum and pedagogy, as well as “different forms of governance from the rest of the higher education sector.”¹³ The new universities also stood out for their geographical placement and campus architecture. Universities did not necessarily belong in old traditional buildings placed in the middle of the city. These new placements necessarily affected the campus architecture of the new universities, which often followed the architectural trends of the time. The different innovations and changes in and around the educational system all contributed to nuancing the idea of what a university was expected to be.

During the 1960s, the number of students at the Danish universities increased dramatically. The system was booming. From the period 1960 to 1968, the universities experienced a tripling in the number of students. A new generation of students, one with a broader social and cultural background than had hitherto been seen was interested in and had the possibility of accessing higher education. Denmark was therefore in urgent need of new higher education institutions. To accommodate the increased number of students, the Danish parliament decided to establish several new universities throughout the country. The decision was immediately followed by a larger discussion concerning where in the country the new institutions should be located. It soon became clear that several important regional political issues were at stake.

The plans to establish new university centres were closely linked to the expansion of the university in Copenhagen.¹⁴ Discussions strongly emphasised that the purpose of the new universities was to relieve the traditional ones, and several politicians thought that the educational needs were greatest in the eastern part of Denmark (Zealand and Funen).¹⁵ Some politicians and academics, from the metropolitan area in particular, found it difficult to see why it was necessary to place a university in Aalborg – one of Denmark’s peripheral regions.¹⁶ In an interview for the local newspaper, the former minister for education Helge Larsen (1915–2000) stated that he believed that the

10 Peter Mandal Hansen, *Aalborg Universitets campus arkitektur* (Aalborg: Aalborg Universitet 2014), 6.

11 See, for example, Thomas Karlsruhn’s presentation of the discussions in Thomas Karlsruhn, *Universitetets idé: Sexton nyckeltexter* (Gothenburg: Daidalos, 2016), 17–157.

12 Jill Pellew and Taylor Miles eds., *Utopian Universities: A Global History of the New Campuses of the 1960s* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 1.

13 *Ibid.*, 4.

14 Else Hansen, *Professorer, studenter og polit.er: Om velfærdsstatens universitetspolitik 1950–1975* (Copenhagen: Museums Tusculanums Forlag, 2017), 332.

15 J. Munck Nordentoft, “Træk af universitetstankens historie,” in *Et nordjysk universitetscenter*, ed. Alfred Bøgh et al. (Aalborg: Nordjyllands Universitetsforening, 1970), 15–20.

16 *Ibid.*

explanation was “that a certain tradition is needed to choose higher education, and that this tradition is better incorporated in Zealand.”¹⁷ This point of view contrasted greatly with the attitude towards higher education in neighbouring Norway and Sweden, where the establishment of new universities was largely seen as an important part of the development of different regions, and a number of universities were established far to the North, including Umeå University in 1965, Luleå in 1971 and Tromsø in 1972.¹⁸

Danish society changed significantly in several ways throughout the 1950s and 1960s. The development of the welfare state and the improved economy for the country as a whole and for the individual families, in particular, meant that society changed fundamentally. In the great period of the welfare state, 1956–1973, a large number of schemes of social security benefits were introduced in order to secure more equality in society and a dignified existence for all citizens. The educational institutions were among the most important institutions in the welfare state.¹⁹ All levels of education – from primary school to university – were seen as important elements for the possibility of social mobility. The mantra was that “educational choices should be determined by the individual’s interest and abilities, and not their social and geographical background.”²⁰

These changes also affected the universities. As more and more people had the opportunity to study at the university, society demanded more and more specialized labour. 1960s society demanded experts with an understanding, to name a few examples, of social issues, planning, mass media, and the developing world.²¹

It is amidst all this that we should situate discussion of the university in Aalborg. Ever since the debate about the new universities had begun at a national level, politicians, business communities, and people with connections to educational institutions from Northern Jutland had tried to promote Aalborg as a new Danish university city. Nevertheless, there were also internal disagreements. Not everyone from Northern Jutland supported Willum Hansen’s idea of a university in the region.

Pros and cons of a university in Aalborg

The debate concerning the establishment of a university in Aalborg was not only centred on the location. It also concerned which kind of university it should be, and what type of student one was to attract. The politicians’ ideas behind Aalborg University were in several ways similar to those which led to the establishment of the university in Roskilde.²² Both institutions were expected to spearhead the reform of university education in Denmark. However, the regional conditions at the two universities were very different and this also influenced the discussions and expectations that the local

17 Han mente at forklaringen var, ”at der skal en vis tradition til for at vælge højere uddannelse, og den tradition er bedre indarbejdet på Sjælland.” The quote is taken from Peter Plenge, *Aalborg Universitet – fra idé til virkelighed: Peter Plenges 40 års jubilæum* (Aalborg: Aalborg University 2011), 4.

18 Hansen, (2017), 332. The three universities are just a few examples of institutions that were located on the outskirts of the major cities.

19 Hansen, (2017), 14.

20 ”Uddannelsesvalg skulle afgøres af den enkeltes lyst til evner, ikke social og geografisk baggrund.” Hansen, (2017), 15.

21 Hansen, (2017), 12.

22 Allan Clausen, *Kampen for et nordjysk universitet* (Aalborg: Aalborg University Press, 1984), 2.

advocates for the university expressed. Due to its proximity to Copenhagen, the university in Roskilde did not have the same focus on regional development. At the same time, regional development was a central argument for establishing a university in Aalborg.²³

What kind of university did the proponents have in mind? Reading the debates in *Aalborg Stiftstidende* in the months after the publications of Willum Hansen's article, it is clear that it was not a traditional university. Although Willum Hansen had already aired the idea about establishing a university in Northern Jutland at a public meeting the year before,²⁴ it was his article in *Aalborg Stiftstidende* in 1960 that accelerated a public debate on the need for the development of university education in the northern part of Denmark.²⁵ Shortly after the publication of his article, the regional newspaper gave voice to both supporters and opponents of his idea.²⁶ In the article "Strongly Divided Opinions about a University in Northern Jutland," one reads that the idea had a mixed reception among 24 key personalities of the region.²⁷ Some fully supported the establishment of a university and felt, as Willum Hansen, that it was an urgent matter.²⁸ One of them who backed the idea was chief physician H.O. Bang, who, in particular and unsurprisingly, argued for the establishment of a medical faculty, citing the nationwide shortage of doctors. Others were more sceptical, and a few completely rejected the idea. The critical voices argued that the region had other educational problems that needed to be solved before establishing a university.²⁹

The rich cultural and student life that today characterises Aalborg and the region of Northern Jutland, was significantly different in the 1950s and 1960s. Heavy industry characterized the city of Aalborg. In particular, the shipping, cement and tobacco industries left their mark on the city with C.W. Obels Tobaksfabrik and Aalborg Shipyard as the area's largest private employers, although agriculture and fishing were the dominant occupations in the rural municipalities. Focus was on developing the types of education that could support existing businesses.³⁰

One of the critics who had a different perspective was the police chief Torben Engelsted. According to him it was nothing less than a terrible idea to place universities in the Danish province: "For a young person at the most receptive age, it is not without significance that he spends a few years in a big city, and, with all due respect to our three big provincial cities, they cannot come close to replacing Copenhagen."³¹ A university should be established in a region where there were already several cultural institutions

23 Oldenburg, (1999), 5–7.

24 "Universitet i Aalborg?" *Aalborg Stiftstidende*, September 3 (1960), 10.

25 Clausen, (1984), 5.

26 Oldenburg, (1999), 190–191.

27 Erik Randel, "Stærkt delte meninger om et universitet i Nordjylland," *Aalborg Stiftstidende*, September 9 (1960), 1, 9–10.

28 H.O. Bang, "En læges synspunkt: Nordjysk universitet?," *Aalborg Stiftstidende*, September 27 (1960), 10.

29 Clausen, (1984), 5.

30 Per Bo Christensen and Jens Topholm, *Aalborg under stilstand og fremgang fra 1814 til 1970* (Aalborg: Aalborg Stadsarkiv, 1990), 403.

31 "For et ungt menneske i den mest modtagelige alder, er det ikke uden betydning, at han tilbringer nogle aar i en virkelig storby, og med al respekt for vores tre store provinsbyer kan de dog ikke paa langt nær erstatte København." Torben Engelsted, "En jurists synspunkt: Mere om universitetet," *Aalborg Stiftstidende*, October 10 (1960).

such as museums and theatres – a well-developed cultural environment. Engelsted believed that, the cultural aspect was one of the things that Aalborg simply lacked.³²

Despite criticism, the work on Willum Hansen's idea began to take shape. In the first half of the 1960s, the North Jutland Committee (*da. Nordjyllandsudvalget*), a committee that was set up originally to create educational opportunities specifically for engineers, began work on promoting the idea of a university in the region.³³ In the years that followed, the committee made a great effort to engage a range of key personalities, such as politicians and regional business people as well as the trade unions, in the matter, while the committee also worked to convince politicians in the capital Copenhagen of the importance of placing a new university in the northern region of Denmark.³⁴

In the end, the work of the committee succeeded. In June 1970, the Danish parliament decided to establish a university centre in Aalborg and that the teaching should begin in the academic year 1974/75.³⁵ Despite the political decision, some tried to prevent the establishment of the university right up until the inauguration. Politician and later Minister of Education Bertel Haarder continued to fight against the university until it became a reality. According to Haarder, there was no need to train more high school teachers in the early 1970s. Furthermore, he was against the experimental pedagogical approaches that were practiced at the university centres in this period.³⁶

After years of discussion and debate, which has since been described as 'the North Jutlandic fight', Aalborg University's first rector, the Swedish historian Jörgen Weibull (1924–1998), made his speech at the inauguration on September 1st, 1974. Denmark had built its fifth university, and Aalborg, the capital of North Jutland, had finally become a university town.

Aalborg University was not established as a university in name, but as a university centre. The term 'university centre' had been part of the 1960s reform policy in the field of education. It was not something that the Ministry of Education in Copenhagen had developed itself, but rather part of a European trend where education was invested in in new ways, as part of the development of welfare states after the Second World War. In Great Britain and the United States, new universities were built, which both academically and architecturally broke with the traditionally academically strictly organized faculties and institutes.³⁷

There was widespread agreement that new universities should not be direct copies of the old ones.³⁸ Together with another new university, Roskilde University Centre, which was located in the east of Denmark, the university in Aalborg was seen as a more experimental institution both in terms of research and pedagogical approach compared with the traditional universities. From the perspective of the national

32 Engelsted (1960).

33 Adolphsen, (1984), 10–18.

34 Clausen (1984), 8–9; Sven Caspersen, *Årsberetning 1974–1976* (Aalborg: Aalborg Universitetscenter, 1976), 8.

35 "Forlag til Lov om Københavns universitets placering og universitetscenter." The bill was proposed on November 28, 1969, and passed on June 4, 1970. See appendix 3 in Ditlev (1999), 221; "Universiteterne. Forslag om placering," *Politiken*, November 11 (1969), 40.

36 Oldenburg, (1999), 23–25.

37 Mandel (2014), 6.

38 Hansen (2017), 327.

politicians, the universities in Roskilde and Aalborg aimed to reduce the pressure on the old universities, especially the University of Copenhagen, but also to challenge them through interdisciplinary and project-based work. Thus, in the establishment of Aalborg University, both national and regional interests were at stake. Each perspective contained different ideas (and agendas) for the university, as well as for how these ideas should be put into practice.

The idea of a university

The debate that Willum Hansen started about higher education is a small piece in a much larger discussion about the different ideas behind the university's purpose and meaning. The idea of what a university is and is expected to be is as old as the university itself and is something that has been discussed many times throughout history.³⁹ The establishment of many new universities, especially in the western world, in the 1960s and 70s sparked a new debate. The debate was centred on the changes several universities underwent, not least the many reforms that wavered over the educational systems in this period.⁴⁰ However, as shown in the first part of the article, the discussions that took place in the North Jutlandic region were about more than a reform of the education system. They were also debates about regional development; for instance, about the future educational possibilities for the young people in an area that in several ways was considered as the rural fringe of Denmark.

The importance of being a part of the surroundings was a point of view that was highlighted several times when Jørgen Weibull, held his speech at the inauguration of Aalborg University: "Participate not only in this party," he instructed his audience, "but also in our everyday life, let the university centre slide in as a natural part of life in North Jutland."⁴¹ His call for engagement with the surrounding community was not without thought. Ever since the debate about establishing several new universities in Denmark had begun at a national level in the 1950s, the issue of geography had been at stake. His call applied to all – employees, business, organisations, unions, students – who would encounter the university in their everyday life.

What was the projected purpose of the new university in the northern part of Denmark? In the study of the ideas that characterized the debate about Aalborg University in the early history of the institution, two points in particular stand out: the importance of a close connection to the local and regional environment and the wish to reform the education system. The last point was, as already mentioned, characteristic not only of Aalborg University but of the reform of the higher education system which took place especially in the western part of the world throughout the period. The demand for reform

39 Karlsohn, 2016, 19–21; See also Johan Östling, *Humboldt and the Modern German University: An Intellectual History* (Lund: Lund University Press, 2018); Jens Erik Kristensen, ed., *Ideer om et universitet: Det moderne universitets idehistorie fra 1800 til i dag* (Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 2007), 24–71.

40 See for instance Thomas Karlsohn's introductory article in *Universitetets idé: Sexton nyckeltexter*, where he gives a detailed description of the idea of the university in the present and in history as well as he describes several of the changes that the universities in the western part of the world have gone through from the 1960s and onwards. Karlsohn, (2016), 17–157.

41 "Deltag ikke bare i denne fest, men også i vores hverdag, lad universitetscenteret glide ind som en naturlig del af livet i Nordjylland." Jørgen Weibull, "AUC skal være en del af Nordjylland," in *AUC i debat. 50 kronikker fra Aalborg Stiftstidende 1972–1983*, ed. Sven Caspersen and Ernst-Ullrich Pinkert (Aalborg: Aalborg University Center and Aalborg Stiftstidende, 1983), 34.

came both from the political side as well as from teachers, students and other key actors in the university's life and work in the wake of 1968.

The debate about the establishment of Aalborg University differs significantly from the other Danish universities. A special feature was the local commitment to the institution. "There is no university in this country and hardly many other places either, which from its inception has done such intense work to integrate into the society in which it has been located, as is the case with Aalborg University Centre," a journalist wrote in 1983.⁴² Carl Willum Hansen believed that the establishment of a university in the region would make much-needed improvements to the educational conditions of North Jutland's young inhabitants.⁴³ The university ended up doing much more than that. The university changed the region, but the region has, to an equal extent, also shaped Aalborg University and made it what it is today.

Histories of the Scandinavian universities

University history is in many ways a vast field. In the Scandinavian countries, the tradition of writing the history of these learned institutions stretches back at least to the seventeenth century.⁴⁴ With this long tradition in mind, one could imagine that the history of universities throughout the ages has been approached in a myriad of ways. It is surprising, therefore, how few fluctuations have occurred within this historiographical tradition.⁴⁵ Despite the advanced age of the genre, university history is characterised by its uniformity. Johan Östling has indicated that it "ought to be possible to write the rich history of the university employing dissimilar focal points; it should be possible to vary its theme. Nevertheless, it is remarkable how limited the historiography of the university has been."⁴⁶

University history is a genre that is particularly marked by the so-called 'jubilee syndrome' and a certain degree of self-justification.⁴⁷ Critical studies have been few and far between. There are, of course, several good reasons why the 'jubilee' approach dominates the genre. The university historical publications are often motivated by and published in connection with different kinds of celebrations, just as it is often the university's own people who are behind the written word. No one wants to ruin the party. Another characteristic of these jubilee histories is that they often are focused on one individual institution without contextualising the university in question within the historical and educational landscapes in which it originates and operates.

42 "Der er intet universitet her til lands og næppe ret mange andre steder heller, der fra sin start har gjort et så intenst arbejde for at integrere sig i det samfund, hvori det er blevet placeret, som tilfældes er med Aalborg Universitetscenter." Børge Rønnov, "Nordjydernes Universitet," in *AUC i debat. 50 kronikker fra Aalborg Stiftstidenden 1972–1983*, ed. Caspersen and Pinkert, 10–11.

43 "Universitet i Aalborg?" *Aalborg Stiftstidende*, September 3 (1960); Hansen, (1960).

44 Gunnar Broberg and David Dunér eds. *Beredd till bådaderna: Lunds Universitet och omvärlden* (Lund: Lund University, 2017), 22–33.

45 Östling (2018).

46 Johan Östling, Erling Sandmo, David Larsson Heidenblad, Anna Nilsson Hammar, and Kari H. Nordberg, "Introduction," in *Circulation of Knowledge: Explorations in the History of Knowledge*, ed. Östling et al. (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2018), 2. See also Johan Östling, "Bortom konventionens gränser: Universitetshistoria som idé- och kunskaphistoria," in *Universitetets gränser*, ed. Peter Josephson and Thomas Karlsohn (Gothenburg: Arche Press, 2019), 250–271.

47 Östling (2018), 3; Sivert Langholm, *Helheten och delene: Hvordan skrive en 200 års historie for Universitetet i Oslo?* (Oslo: Forum for universitetshistorie, Universitetet i Oslo, 1996).

A large part of the history of Danish universities can be placed under this jubilee category. Research on the history of the younger Danish universities especially is limited and often biographically oriented.⁴⁸ Several anniversary writings have been published that tell the histories of the establishment of universities with a classic focus on the so-called founding fathers, while questions about for example university policy, conflicts or gender often are entirely absent.⁴⁹ However, a few exceptions are important to mention.⁵⁰ Else Hansen's two books about Roskilde University Centre and the university policy of the welfare state, *En koral i tidens strøm. RUC 1972–1997* (1997) and *Professorer, studenter og polit.er: Om velfærdsstatens universitetspolitik 1950–1975* (2017), and Jens Frøsløv Christensen's descriptions on the conflicts at Copenhagen Business School in 2011, *Oprøret på CBS* (2016), are examples of publications that dare to challenge the genre and address the conflicts that have also been a central part of the universities' histories.⁵¹ This is also the case for Ning de Coninck-Smith's pathbreaking research on female students and employees at Aarhus University.⁵² There is no doubt that the newer studies are evolving the genre from a Danish perspective.

Nevertheless, there is still a need for more research-based studies of the individual universities, as well as for histories of the Danish university. Narratives about the individual institutions tend to close in on themselves, where a broader story might be able to embrace a more versatile or multifaceted history about the universities' goals and meanings instead of treating the individual university as separable from the intellectual, societal and cultural contexts in which it was formed.

Although the present study also limits its focus to a single university and has a considerable focus on several of 'the founding fathers', it tries to make the gap smaller by offering a novel approach that focusing on the ideas and expectations that have characterised and influenced the identity of the university centre in a politically charged time. The fight for a university in Northern Jutland has been the focal point for several smaller publications about the origins of Aalborg University. In these publications, it is usually people who were themselves involved in the events who tell the story. This is not necessarily a problem. The fact that the authors have been part of an organisation and then convey part of its history can also be a strength. The authors possess a very special internal knowledge of their institutions. However, they tend to focus more on people and personal relations than the situation of the university's history in a larger context.

Although anniversaries are still the starting point for many publications, research into the history of universities has developed significantly over the past decade. A

48 On the history of the three Danish universities The University of Southern Denmark, Roskilde University and Aalborg University, see Jeppe Nevers, *En verden af viden: Syddansk Universitet, 1966–2016* (Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag 2016); Else Hansen, *En koral i tidens strøm: RUC 1972–1997* (Roskilde: Roskilde Universitetsforlag, 1997); Marianne Rostgaard, *Aalborg Universitet – en billedfortælling* (Aalborg: Aalborg University, 2014); Hansen (2017).

49 A detailed information about the literature on Danish universities in the period 1950–1975 can be found in Hansen (2017), 31–38.

50 See also Else Hansen's discussion about the university history in Denmark. Hansen (2017), 26–38.

51 Jens Frøsløv Christensen, *Oprøret på CBS: Forandring, ledelse og modstand i en professionel organisation* (Frederiksberg: Samfundslitteratur 2016).

52 Ning de Coninck-Smith, "Gender Encounters University—University Encounters Gender: Affective Archives Aarhus University, Denmark 1928–1953," *Women's History Review* 29, no. 3 (2020), 413–28.

new and rapidly developing approach focuses on the history of knowledge. In the beginning of the twenty-first century more and more scholars, historians especially, began to describe their research as part of the history of knowledge.⁵³ In the anthology *Circulation of Knowledge. Explorations in the History of Knowledge*, the editors stress how the status of knowledge nowadays is entirely contested: “Political and economic aspirations are closely bound up with knowledge institutions, yet at the same time leading politicians question scientific truths, and the new media landscape is awash with so-called alternative facts.”⁵⁴ Dominant themes in the present debate have always affected historians’ work with the past. Since the turn of the millennium, questions about knowledge have characterised much research and have thus also gathered historians in the new field.⁵⁵

In his comprehensive study of the Humboldt University,⁵⁶ Johan Östling takes his point of departure from a knowledge-historical perspective and he emphasizes that writing

a history of the university as a history of knowledge implies an important clarification: discussions about the idea of the university are not just part of a public debate on ideas or a national tradition. They represent an aspect of the changing nature and institutional foundations of knowledge: the kind of knowledge that is worth achieving, the way in which it is generated and mediated, what its organisation and structure look like, and so on.⁵⁷

Universities and other research institutions have never been closed entities isolated from the surrounding society. Rather, they are flexible institutions that have adapted to the demands, wishes and pressures of their surroundings. The Danish historian Else Hansen has stressed how “research and teaching are designed in a delicate balance between demands from the society that finances the institutions, demands from the disciplines’ own circle of immersion and new insights and the students’ demands for relevance.”⁵⁸

The various people who belong to the university create, develop, and circulate a wealth of different forms of knowledge: practical knowledge, tacit knowledge, structural knowledge, scientific knowledge. These are all forms of knowledge that can form the basis of a historical study of the university as a knowledge institution. Knowledge is established and circulated in interaction with various people and institutions within and outside the university sphere. A study of the circulation of knowledge at the

53 See Johan Östling, “Vad är kunskapshistoria,” *Historisk tidsskrift* 135, no. 1 (2015), 109–19.

54 Östling et al. (2018), 10.

55 Simone Lässig, “The History of Knowledge and the Expansion of the Historical Research Agenda,” *Bulletin of the GHI Washington* (2016), 29–58; Maria Simonsen and Laura Skouvig, “Videnshistorie: Nye veje i historievitenskaberne,” *Temp – tidsskrift for historie* (2019), 5–26.

56 Östling et al., (2018), 8.

57 Ibid.

58 “Universiteter er fleksible institutioner, der gennem historien har tilpasset sig krav, ønsker og pres fra de samfund, som har understøttet universiteterne, og som har modtaget viden og uddannede kandidater fra universiteterne. Forskning og undervisning udformes i en delikat balance mellem krav fra det samfund, som finansierer institutionerne, krav fra fagenes egen kreds om fordybelse og nye indsigter og studenternes krav om relevans.” Hansen (2017), 11.

universities makes visible how knowledge is converted, anchored, and changed and thus also the universities strong interaction with the outside world throughout the ages.

Another Scandinavian historian, Thomas Karlsohn, has previously described thoroughly, the idea of the university, its purpose and meaning, is historically contingent.⁵⁹ The role and function of the university is not set in stone, but constantly up for discussion, depending, among other factors, on the changing perceptions of the importance of knowledge and research.⁶⁰

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⁵⁹ Karlsohn, (2016), 17–157.

⁶⁰ Else Hansen, “Hvordan bruges universitetshistorie?” *Uddannelseshistorie. Årbog for Selskabet for Skole- og Uddannelseshistorie* 43 (2009), 88–98.

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