

## Reimagining and enacting academic agency

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### Preliminary abstract:

In recent years the meaning of ‘agency’, along with the meanings of associated words, ‘autonomy’ and ‘freedom’ have substantially changed. This conference embraces the current challenge for academics to critically reflect on the meanings of those words and translate them into the transformative practice needed to bring about positive change. This presentation will argue that the traditional role of universities (as critic and conscience of society, rather than as an agency for government policy) is urgently needed to help stem the widespread democratic backsliding and autocratic aggrandisement and renew ways of creating and sustaining forms of participatory democracy. The presentation will explore the scope to recapture academic agency for positive transformation of society on four scales. The first is our own classrooms and research projects and I will give examples of how the old sense of academic freedom and student *lehrfreiheit* and *lernfreiheit* can be used to good effect. Second, I will give an example of how a university can use its own research and professional resources to investigate its own internal governance and improve academics’ room for manoeuvre. Third, an example of ‘whole system’ reform of the governance of another public sector shows it is possible to rethink the meanings and practices of agency and institutional autonomy and reinstate the freedom and capacity of front-line workers to exercise their own professionalism. Fourth I will reflect on how challenging the limitations posed by neoliberal governance can open ways for universities to enhance participatory forms of democracy, and work for a greener and more equitable society. In conclusion I will comment on the conference organisers’ question: how can we imagine a university 10 years from now? That’s too slow; we have to start acting with urgency now.

### Short Bio:

Susan Wright (D.Phil. Oxford) is Professor of Educational Anthropology and Co-Director of the Centre for Higher Education Futures (CHEF) at the Danish School of Education, Aarhus University. She is a member of the Danish Royal Academy of Sciences and Letters. She studies people's participation in large-scale processes of political transformation and has researched higher education and university reforms for 35 years in UK and Denmark, developing concepts of audit culture, governance, and the anthropology of policy. She co-edits the journal LA-TIIS (Learning and Teaching: International Journal of Higher Education in the Social Sciences) and the book series ‘Higher Education in Critical Perspective: Practices and Policies’ (Berghahn).

