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Reforming Swedish Higher Education in the Context of the Bologna Process

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STUDIA

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Introduction

Sweden is considered to be one of the OECD countries that invest most in tertiary education and research at HEIs. Nowadays, total expenditure per student was highest in the USA, followed by Canada and Switzerland, with Sweden in fourth place. Such high rate is a result of different reforms, that have taken place in the Swedish education policy during last decades.

National higher education system in Sweden is currently undergoing radical restructuring, motivated by the objectives and action lines put forward in the Bologna process¹. According to the Lisbon strategy, the aim is to make Europe the world's most dynamic and competitive economy, creating a coherent European Knowledge Society. Of the ten action lines for the process, the first three², put forward in the Bologna Declaration 1999, laid the foundation for the structural change in Sweden now well under way in the EHEA.

¹ R. Keeling, *The Bologna Process and the Lisbon Research Agenda: the European Commission's expanding role in higher education discourse*, „European Journal of Education” 2006, 41, p. 203.

² The three first action lines are: Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees; Adoption of a system essentially based on two cycles; Establishment of a system of credits (European Commission, 2007).

“Traces” of large reforms in the Swedish national higher education system

The Swedish system has been determined primarily by three large reforms, which have left substantial “traces” in its higher education structure, i.e. the reforms of 1955, 1977 and 1993. During the last decade, these reforms have been followed by the implementation of the Bologna process (2007) with its profound effect on the degree structure and the internationalisation of the system; and finally, the Autonomy Reform (2011), aiming at strengthening the independence of the higher education institutions in relation to the state.

The 1955 Reform – Adapting to a Student Overload

Between the 1950s and 1960s, the number of completed matriculation examinations doubled. This development paved the way for an increased demand for higher education, especially for education supplied by philosophical faculties (see below). The system was not prepared for such an explosion. The number of professors, and the disciplines they represented, was restricted. The system, only encompassing a handful of universities and specialised institutions, was rigid and state-regulated in large detail in terms of operations and faculties. The responsibility for the content and organisation of higher education was delegated to the faculties, being chaired by the discipline-oriented and powerful professors³.

In order to respond to the quantitative and qualitative problems emerging from the increased inflow of students, the higher education institutions were reformed and expanded gradually in size and scope, starting with an enhancement of existing universities. The reform was made in the context of political ideals linked to human capital theories and the belief in more instrumental-oriented universities supplying society with a well-prepared and qualified labour force particularly in engineering, science and medicine science. In comparison with other university faculties and post-secondary institutions, using more selective standards for admission, the completion rate at the free faculties was almost half. To come to grips with this undesirable situation, a new teaching category was introduced in 1959 – the lecturer – being a pure teaching position, and as such, generating a divide between the two core mis-

³ C. G. Andrén, *Visioner, vägval och verkligheter. Svenska universitet och högskolor i utveckling efter 1940*, Nordic Academic Press, Lund 2013.

sions of universities – higher education and research⁴. As such, the professors could devote themselves more strongly to research and the supervision of doctoral students.

The 1973 Reform – Widening the Access to Higher Education

The 1970s represents a period which is known to be the period of comprehensive political reform programmes in Sweden more generally and the 1977 reform within the higher education sector was no exception. The 1977 reform, taking an overall grip of post-secondary education, was mainly a political project, which was preceded by numerous large-scale and dramatic university investigations in the 1960s. The reform was mainly driven by the political ideals of democracy, equality, uniformity (in Swedish, *enhetlighet*), and trust in central planning⁵. The overall aim of the reform was to widen the access to higher education for new target groups and hence, to expand the system both socially and geographically. To reach this aim, a common and unitary system was established, meaning that all post-secondary education (including academic, vocational and longer and shorter professional programmes) was transferred into the higher education sector and as such, they became subordinated to a common higher education regulatory framework⁶. Both the new and old institutions were categorised under the same label, *högskolan*, as a means to overcome regional and generational injustice and to decrease status differences between various institutions and programmes⁷. In addition, a number of new university colleges were founded and established in various regions of the country in order to stimulate the geographical spread. In many cases, these new organisations were based on previous colleges of education⁸, and in contrast to the universities, which mainly were research-oriented, the new institutions' main mission was, at least in the beginning, to provide education at the undergraduate level. Accordingly. The “regionalisation” of the system⁹

⁴ B. Askling, *Expansion, självständighet, konkurrens. Vart är den högre utbildningen på väg?* Göteborgs Universitet, Göteborg 2012.

⁵ M. Bauer, B. Askling, S. Marton, F. Marton, *Transforming Universities: Changing patterns of governance, structure and learning in Swedish higher education*, Jessica Kingsley, London 1999.

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ B. Askling *Expansion, självständighet, konkurrens...*, op. cit.

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ The six HE regions in Sweden were Stockholm, Uppsala, Linköping, Lund/Malmö, Göteborg and Umeå. The largest region was Stockholm whereas Linköping constituted the fastest growing region during the 1970s and 1980s. (SCB, 1987).

introduced a second layer of governance into the Swedish system as the system was divided into six regions¹¹ comprising a number of universities and university colleges, being subordinated to a regional board respectively. These boards, together with the National Board for Universities and Colleges (UHÄ), planned the provision of education.

During this time, higher education at the undergraduate level was also re-structured in five broad sectors with fixed study courses. These had a clear vocational direction in order to fit the demands of the labour market¹⁰.

The 1973 Reform – The “Freedom for Quality”

The 1993 reform was a political victory for the Alliance, which struggled to create a competitive knowledge society or “higher education marketplace” on the basis of academic core values like quality, freedom, academic autonomy and academic excellence¹¹. The new model of governing the higher education sector meant a shift from the state-level on the basis of regulation and input control, to governance through control of outcomes and through external forces acting upon the university and colleges¹². This meant that the Government and the Parliament (Riksdag) established certain targets and frameworks (mainly of a financial nature) and the local institutions were delegated the task of meeting these objectives within a given framework¹³. The decentralisation of decision-making increased the power of the local academic management, especially the board and the rector, and with the support of the local administration, they had to decide on strategic plans for the operations. Also the functions of the deans and the head of departments were clarified and strengthened. On the other hand, the professors lost power, as government no longer appointed them. Consequently, they could lose their chairs. The UHÄ was replaced by the Swedish Agency for Higher Education Services (*Verket för Högskoleservice*), with the central responsibility for managing student admission and statistics. In addition, a central secretariat was established for evaluating

¹⁰ M. Bauer, B. Askling, S. Marton, F. Marton, *Transforming Universities: Changing patterns of governance, structure and learning in Swedish higher education*, Jessica Kingsley, London 1999; B. Askling *Expansion, självständighet, konkurrens...*, op. cit.; *Annual Report*, Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, 2013.

¹¹ M. Bauer, B. Askling, S. Marton, F. Marton, *Transforming Universities...*, op. cit.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ L. Engwall, *Universities, the State and the Market: Changing Patterns of University Governance in Sweden and Beyond*, „Higher Education Management and Policy”, 2007, Vol. 19, No. 3, s. 87–104.

the operations of higher education institutions. This secretariat was later re-organised into the National Agency for Higher Education (*Högskoleverket*)¹⁴. The centralised study-line system for higher education was abolished, and the orientation and planning of undergraduate programmes was decentralised to the local level. As an outcome, there was an explosion and flexibility of new programmes and courses at the local level and an increased inflow of new students in Sweden¹⁵. *In addition, the reform* opened up for an increased demand on single institutions for managing the quality of their higher education and to report their activities to the State.

The 1993 reform was also inspired by the principles of freedom of students to choose their own education and to adapt higher education to the demands of the students. A new Degree Ordinance was established, replacing the earlier centrally determined study programmes. It was established to define goals and the main directions for the recognised higher education degrees. Courses that could be combined into programmes were introduced as the basis for the new system of study. To interpose, the higher education ordinance (HEO) lays down which degrees may be awarded in Swedish higher education. Higher education, except for doctoral studies, is provided in the form of courses of different length, which may be linked together to constitute programmes with varying levels of individual choice. Students could also themselves combine different courses for the award of a degree.

The 2007 Reform – Bologna Process

Sweden was a latecomer when it comes to reforming the system in line with the objectives set in the Bologna declaration and unlike the situation in many other countries, it did not attract much media attention. Even though it was one of the first countries to sign the Declaration in 1999, the objectives were not translated into practice in Swedish higher education until July 2007. The reform process took its starting point in the belief of the political regime on the value of internationalising higher education. The reform was prepared during 2004, suggested in 2005, and after a long period of political preparations, debates and oppositions, decided on in 2006. In June 2006, a renewed HEA and HEO were laid down (including the European Qualification Framework) and

¹⁴ B. Askling, *Expansion, självständighet, konkurrens...*, op. cit.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

subsequently the implementation at the institutional level took place in 2007, to be presented to prospective students the same year¹⁶.

In June 2005, the Government bill “New world – New university” was presented. In this bill, a more thorough version of the Bologna process was described, with a change to the international perspectives as the framing horizon. The earlier proposal of a standards-based “ECTS grading scale” was not part of the bill at all. Though the bill was late, the timetable for the reform was not changed. The main proposals were:

- Higher education should be divided into three cycles, building on a renewed credit-system and a pre-defined number of credits for each degree¹⁷.
- Degrees both for a one-year and a two-year master should be developed.
- National descriptions of expected learning outcomes should be introduced for all degrees, both general and professional.
- The previous requirement of specialisation in a major subject for a degree of Bachelor or Master, expressed as a certain amount of credits in the major subject, should be removed from the degree descriptions, and replaced by expected learning outcomes.
- The third cycle, research education, should remain the length of four years, but the first year could be replaced by one year of the two-year master degree in the second cycle.

An overview of the timing of the initial stages of the Swedish Bologna reform is displayed according to the following order:

¹⁶ A. Lindberg-Sand, *The Swedish Bologna process – reckless race of revitalizing reform?*, Paper presented to the 29th Annual EAIR Forum 2007.

¹⁷ The professional degrees that are more than three years of length would not have to split their programmes into a Bachelor and then a Master. But all courses in such programmes should be labelled as belonging either to the first or to the second cycle.

Timing of the initial stages of the Swedish Bologna reform

2004	2005	2006	2007
The Government Bill.	The Parliamentary decision.	HE Act and Ordinance laid down	The students arrive.
		New structure, programmes and courses developed and published.	

Figure 1. *Timing of the initial stages of the Swedish Bologna reform*

It is necessary to admit, that in Sweden, most Government decisions at the system level corresponded to the Bologna recommendations, albeit a number of deviations were made to adapt to the Swedish conditions. Already in 2003, a Diploma Supplement, describing the degree programme and its place in the educational system was introduced. The adoption of a new three-tiered system was also decided, as well as a new credit system. Another problem referred to the institutions' construction of new degrees. The humanities and social sciences, where the traditions have been a "free choice of studies", had severe problems with constructing new degrees, as they had to start with designing a preliminary educational organisation on which to base their programmes. On the other hand, the long professional programmes (as in science and medicine) were obvious easier to handle. Even though their syllabi had to be revised, the character of their degrees did not have to change.

The 2010 Reform – The Autonomy

The Autonomy Reform has its roots largely in the 1993 "Freedom of quality reform" and its ideals of independence and freedom of higher education institutions, especially in relation to the state. In 2007, a specific government investigation was appointed to find appropriate models for how public higher education institutions would be organised on the basis of such ideals. The aim was, among other things to protect the universities' autonomy and discretion in terms of resource allocation, the internal organisation and management etc. In 2008, the report "Independent universities"¹⁸ was handed over to the Government and its suggestions gave rise to an echo and debate in the higher education landscape. The proposal was rejected in the Government Bill "En akademi i tiden. Ökad frihet för universitet och högskolor", declaring that

¹⁸ SOU, 2008: 104, Independent higher education institutions (*Självständiga lärosäten*).

an increased freedom should instead be organised within the current agency form. It was decided that the decision-making of public universities would become more decentralised to promote quality and that the governmental control would be restricted to quality issues in research and education, accountability and justice (*rättfärdighet*). The reform led to a series of reductions in the higher education legislation and the universities were granted more freedom to re-shape their organisation, management, and decision-making structures on the basis of their local conditions. They were independent to recruit faculty (except the categories of professors and senior lecturers), and to plan the content and volume of education. The Government retained its control over the appointment of the chair and members of the university boards and also the appointment of the rectors, and funding.

In 2013, the Government presented an additional proposal¹⁹, which aimed at increasing the freedom of action of the universities even further by transforming them into private foundations with “specific conditions”.

Current position of Swedish national education system

In Sweden, overall responsibility for higher education and research rests with the Riksdag (Swedish Parliament) and the government. They decide on the regulations that are applied in the higher-education area. They also determine objectives, guidelines and the allocation of resources for the area.

The Ministry of Education and Research is responsible for issues relating to schools, higher education institutions (HEIs), research, adult education, popular education and student aid. The public-sector HEIs are public agencies responsible to the Ministry of Education and Research. One exception is Sveriges Lantbruksuniversitet (Swedish University of Agricultural Studies), which is accountable to the Ministry of Agriculture. Other agencies, such as Skolverket (Swedish National Agency for Education), Högskoleverket (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education) and Vetenskapsrådet (Swedish Research Council), are also accountable to the Ministry of Education and Research.

Higher education institutions

All higher education is offered by public-sector higher education institutions or by independent education providers that have been granted

¹⁹Annual Report, Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, 2013.

degree-awarding powers by the government. Third-cycle courses and programmes are offered by universities and university colleges that have been granted entitlement to award third-cycle qualifications. The decision to grant entitlement to award a third-cycle qualification is made by the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education according to new regulations that apply from 2010 onwards.

There are 14 public-sector universities and 21 public-sector university colleges in Sweden. In addition there are three independent HEIs that are entitled to award third-cycle qualifications: Chalmers University of Technology, the Stockholm School of Economics and Jönköping University Foundation. There are also nine independent education providers entitled to award first-cycle, and in some cases second-cycle, qualifications as well as five course providers entitled to award qualifications in psychotherapy.

The regulations that govern higher education institutions

In Sweden, public-sector HEIs are agencies in their own right that report directly to the government. The operations of HEIs are regulated by the laws and statutes that apply to the area of higher education. As government agencies, the HEIs are also subject to administrative and labour-market legislation and the provisions of the Instrument of Government. Their operations are also governed by the parameters and funding decided by the Swedish Parliament and the government. Higher education in Sweden is governed by the Higher Education Act and the Higher Education Ordinance. The Swedish Higher Education Act and Higher Education Ordinance have been amended in accordance with the agreements reached within the framework of the Bologna Process, including the European Qualifications Framework (QF-EHEA). These amendments apply to courses and programmes offered from 1 July 2007 as well as to qualifications awarded after that date. Courses and programmes that started earlier are subject to transitional provisions.

Conclusion

A uniform admission system, combining centralised and decentralised features, and following the ideals of justice, clarity and transparency, characterises the Swedish system. At the national level the rules are laid down in the

HEA, the HEO²⁰ and the regulations issued by the Swedish Higher Education Authority. The great impact on the development of Swedish has left the reforms of 1955, 1977 and 1993, 2007 and 2010. Each of them has had structural and systematic challenges, which have been adopted in the context of general country policy. Their main peculiarities are adaptation of best experience within the national characteristics and traditions. And as a result the high rate of education level among all society groups.

Abstract: The article concisely reveals the main reforms in the Swedish education system. It, also, outlines the organisational features of the Swedish higher education system in the postwar era, with a focus on the 1970s to the early 2000s. The author analyses political, social and educational conditions which have had a great impact on the process of higher education formation in the context of integration and decentralization policy.

Keywords: higher education, higher education system, reform, Bologna Process, access, quality

²⁰ The HEO stipulates the general entry requirements that apply for all courses and programmes, as well as listing any selection criteria that may be invoked. It also contains regulations on the evaluation of final school grades.

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