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The new attitudes to widening participation in Sweden's higher education institutions

In the autumn of 1999 the newly appointed University Chancellor, Sigbrit Franke, decided on a national evaluation of all Swedish Higher Education Institutions in which they would be compared on three "aspects of quality". The aspects she wanted to focus on in this evaluation were: gender equality, student influence and social and ethnic diversity.

The idea of making such an evaluation was met with very mixed reactions from the academic community. Some were openly hostile, and her initiative was seen as an outrageous and dangerous novelty by some professors at the old traditional universities. They did not question the evaluation per se - The National Agency for Higher Education regularly evaluates different quality aspects of the HEIs so that was nothing new – but they disliked the choice of quality aspects done by the Chancellor. Especially they opposed the idea to include the degree of social and ethnic diversity among the quality criteria. Quality had, they argued, nothing to do with the background of the students, and they could not see why the universities should have to bother with such matters. Besides, recruitment of students was, according to the critical professors, nothing any university could control. You get the students you get, and if you cannot control an aspect why should you be compared on that feature.

This was in 1999. When the Agency in the spring of 2003 renewed the evaluation of the same quality factors no criticism was heard. Today, only four years later, it seems that the majority of the academic community has accepted that the degree of social and ethnic diversity can be regarded as a quality factor among others. It is also generally accepted that universities and university colleges can actively promote a wider participation, even if all are aware that it is not an easy task.

This year, 2003, almost every higher education institution have started to develop action plans and formulate strategies to increase the number of students from underrepresented groups in undergraduate and graduate programs. Even thou the quality of these "action plans" varies a lot, they are examples of a remarkable change in the attitudes towards widening participation. (At least among those in a position from which they can influence what is written in official documents and policy statements).

It is obvious that there has been a dramatic shift in attitudes towards widening participation in Sweden during the last four years. This shift is especially striking at the old universities with a long tradition like Uppsala and Lund (The oldest and most prestigious universities in Sweden with a similar status in our Scandinavian context as Oxford and Cambridge in Britain). They have gone from a position where recruitment of students was seen as almost automatic and nothing to worry about, to a position where they are some of the most sincere and innovative when it comes to widened participation. Both Uppsala and Lund are today taking recruitment seriously, and are trying new ways to come in contact with potential students. Students from groups they did not bother about before. An interesting example is the fact that Uppsala University has reserved 10 percent (30 study positions) in their school of law for students with another native tongue than Swedish. And the faculty board has stood up for its decision, even though there have been strong protests from some conservative law professors.

On the Governmental agenda

The attitude shift on university level has been paralleled by a similar shift on governmental level. It can be argued that in 1999 the question of widening participation was put on top of the political agenda in a way that many found surprising. A number of actors on the education political scene took initiatives in the same direction, sometimes without knowledge of the plans of the others.

The social democratic government decided for example, in 1999, to appoint a special commission whose task was to propose possible ways to increase the number of underrepresented groups in undergraduate and graduate programs. This commission, led by Vice Chancellor Professor Boel Flodgren from Lund University, finally presented a whole range of recommendations to increase diversity in Sweden's HEI. Some of the proposals have resulted in actual reforms, while others are still waiting to be realized.

One of the proposals that has resulted in action was that all HEIs should be asked to draw up *local action plans with measurable objectives for their work to broaden student recruitment*. In this way the progress could be monitored and the efforts coordinated. And even if some have found it "just another burden put upon our shoulders from above", the follow-up study done by the Agency in the spring of 2003, shows that a major part of HEI have written and started to implement such action plans.

The appointment of the commission can be seen as a way to gather information on the subject. The next steps in the action plan of the Government – or more precisely The Ministry of Education – was to use "the carrot and the stick" to promote its ideas.

The carrot

An indicator of the fact that the Ministry of Education really had put the question of widening participation on top of its agenda is that the Government was prepared to set aside a - by Swedish standards – quite a considerable sum of money. A special commission was set up – modelled after the British Action on Access - with the task to *stimulate recruitment activities* at universities and university colleges. In the

budget bill for 2002, the Government proposed that 40 million a year, a total of 120 million SEK, should be reserved for this purpose during the period of 2002-2004.

The stick

When a scholar fifty years from now looks back on what happened during these years, he or she will probably rank the changes made to the Higher Education Act the most important. As mentioned earlier, most university staff and faculty did not consider matters of recruitment as something they had to bother about. But the Government now wanted to make it clear that the question of recruitment is indeed included among the responsibilities of universities and university colleges. Therefore a *provision* was introduced into the Higher Education Act stating that: "*Universities and university colleges shall also actively promote and broaden recruitment to higher education.*"

The change in the law has had important consequences. One is that the Higher Education Act is one of the key documents from which quality indicators in evaluation studies are taken. This means that when the National Agency for Higher Education does one of its regular evaluations of a HEI or a single discipline, the efforts done to broaden recruitment of students are automatically included among the evaluation criteria.

The open university

The Government collected its different actions in order to widen participation in a bill 2001 called: *Den öppna högskolan* (The Open University). It included the topics mentioned above, but also some ideas how to follow up the different actions.

In order to get relevant statistical data, the Government gave the Agency for Higher Education, together with universities and university colleges, a directive to develop a set of statistical key indicators that were sustainable over time. This directive has been carried through, and now we got detailed statistics on key factors such as ethnic background, social-economic background, geographical background and parents educational level. This new statistical data has been very useful to determine the progress of the work with broadened recruitment for each HEI.

As a further initiative to promote widening participation a new type of academic courses was introduced in the Bill. These courses were called "college programs", since they alluded to the american form of colleges – an education *in between* the secondary school system and the university system.

This proposal was met with sharp criticism from some groups. Especially administrators in the educational field found the idea provoking, since it blurred their distinctions between different forms of education. To understand their reactions it is important to bear in mind that in Sweden there has by tradition been a very sharp border between what has been considered academic knowledge, and what is considered knowledge that only should be taught in secondary schools. Seen in a long historical perspective however, the boundary has been moving back and forth quite incredibly. Teaching of basic courses in Latin, for example, was until the 1960's something that strictly belonged

to the secondary school sphere. If anyone proposed that a basic course in Latin should be given at a university he or she was regarded as a person that deliberately wanted to lower the standards and reduce the quality to that of a secondary school. Then Latin was dropped from the secondary school curriculum. After that, the universities had to give the basic training in the language inside university walls. Almost none argues today, however, that this move have lowered the standards. On the other hand some basic skills in computing, that a few decades ago were considered inside the academic sphere and only were taught in technical universities, now are taught in secondary schools.

Still, many professors and administrators are convinced that there is a border between the secondary school system and the universities that should not be stepped over. Therefore it was considered quite remarkable when the Government in the bill mentioned above stated that:

An important measure to achieve broader recruitment is to bridge the distance between the upper secondary school and higher education. The Government proposes that in cooperation with local authority-administrated adult education, the universities should be given the opportunity to *offer so-called college programmes in order to promote recruitment*. This joint university introductory programme should consist of an upper secondary school component of at most 20 weeks in combination with higher education component of at most 20 academic points or credits (equivalent to 20 weeks of full-time study). The purpose of the upper secondary school component in this programme is to strengthen the student's basic knowledge and eligibility. The higher education component should strengthen student's general qualifications and provide an introduction that improves their chances of succeeding in their university studies. The aim is for participants to continue to study at university level. (*Den öppna högskolan* (Prop. 2001/02:15))

The Agency's follow-up study of 2003 indicates that the number of HEI that offers college programmes has increased considerably since the first investigation of 1999. Today nine Universities and twelve University colleges offer college programmes of the kind mentioned in the Bill. (Back in 1999 only one University and one University College experimented with something similar).

Unfortunately the number of students enrolled in college programmes is still very limited. Our assumption is that the recruitment process conducted by HEIs to promote college programmes has not yet evolved on a full scale.

Factors behind the changes in attitude

The question is then - what happened during these four years, that led to such a shift in attitudes. The most apparent answer is to say that the administrators at the universities and university colleges quickly have adjusted their behavior to what they assume the Government and the Ministry of Education expects. They are asked to write action plans for widening participation, so they write such plans in the manner expected. The Government has stated by rewriting the Higher Education Act that recruitment now is considered a responsibility of the universities, and as

loyal institutions they do everything to show that they can take that responsibility. And since there is money to apply for, they try to find interesting projects that can attract the eye of the granting committee.

But even if opportunism is a factor to reckon with, we believe that it is not the only factor behind the sudden interest in widening participation. And even if it might count for the behavior of many academics, it does not explain why both the Ministry of Education and the National Agency for Higher Education put widening participation on top of their agendas at the same time. Except for opportunism we can see four different factors behind the change:

- Structural factors.
- Economic factors.
- Scientific factors.
- Political factors

Structural factors

The growing demand for employees with an academic exam, which can be seen all around Europe, has also affected Sweden in the latter part of the last century. Some economists have argued that this is a natural effect of the shift from an industrialized to a post-industrialized society. Other scholars have questioned the idea of a major economic shift, and instead pointed to other reasons behind rising demands for higher education. Since we are not in the field of economics or economic history, we will not discuss that question here. Just let's state the fact that the Swedish government has set a goal that 50% of the population under the age of 25 should have an academic exam in the near future. (Today in Sweden it is 47 %, and over 50% among women).

The fifty percent goal can be seen as the culmination of a process that started a decade ago. The higher education system in Sweden had been expanding rapidly since the beginning of the 1990's, and the total number of students almost doubled between 1990 and 2000. The fact that the number of places in HEIs has doubled over at ten-year period does not, however, in itself necessarily lead to a change in the attitude towards a widening participation. You could continue to recruit your new students from the same narrow base of middle and upper class families. But by doing so you will fill more and more seats with students with lower and lower degrees from the secondary schools. Chances are also that these new students will be less motivated. This has led to a fear of that expansion of the higher education system will lead to a lowering of the quality.

If, on the other hand, it would be possible to broaden the base from which the students are recruited, growing numbers would not mean that you would have to accept students with lower levels of motivation and intellectual capacity. Those, who for some reason, assume that intelligence is related to class or wealth will of course not see broadening of the recruitment base as a possible alternative. But most academics see no such connection, and for them widening participation is seen as a necessary way to keep the quality as the number of students increases. So the expansion of the system has in Sweden led to an acceptance for the idea that we have to try to widen participation in higher education.

Economic factors

Naturally there have been, in Sweden as elsewhere, those who have been critical to the very fast expansion of the higher education system. But they have been surprisingly few, and their critique has been very weak. It is only with the debate around Alison Wolfs book, *Does education matter?*, that we got a more outspoken questioning of the 50% goal. One reason for the general acceptance in academic circles is that human capital theories were accepted very early in economic circles in Sweden. Neo-liberals, as well as social democrats, have all seen a well-educated population as a key factor behind economic growth. It is typical that the expansion started in 1993 when we had a conservative-liberal government in Sweden, and then kept the same pace after we got social democrats back in power from 1994 and onwards.

A common argument in the debate on widening participation in Sweden, is that it is a waste of resources only to recruit students from a small segment in the society. By doing so the nation runs the risk of missing some of its smartest and brightest individuals in the younger generation. This argument combined with the human capital theory has given a strong incitement to take action on state level. There are in Sweden however, economic reasons on university level as well, to broaden the recruitment base.

In 1993 a new system for financing the universities and colleges in Sweden was introduced. Instead of a system where the institutions got money over the state budget after a negotiation over their demands, the money for undergraduate studies were given in accordance with the "productivity" of the institution. Only the number of students and their results should determine the sum given. This has led to a situation where almost the only way to increase your budget is to increase the number of students you enroll. So, in Sweden, the expansion of the higher education system has also been in the interest of the universities and colleges themselves.

If the only way to increase your budget is to recruit more students, and if you already have covered your traditional "hunting grounds" then you are left with two options. Either you try to attract students to your institution, that otherwise would have chosen another university. Or you have to broaden the base for recruitment.

Scientific factors

A factor that motivated some teachers, administrators and politicians to take action was that new research indicated that it might be possible to change the social patterns of recruitment to higher education. Since the mid 1960's the main belief among sociologists and researchers in the field of education has been, that the processes that finally lead to a domination of persons from upper or middle class homes in universities is a process that starts early. This led to the conclusion that the only way to come to grips with the phenomena is to concentrate the efforts on the primary school system. To the most cynical even that was a futile approach. According to them the whole school system must be seen as a gigantic machine for sorting children and keep the class divisions intact.

Kids from "better homes get better degrees" whether they are worth it or not, was the message. But even if this might be true in general terms, quite a few manages to break the pattern. Now research done by the sociologists Robert Ericsson and Jan Jonsson showed that if you correlated for the early sorting mechanism, and matched children with exactly the same degrees in secondary schools, their tendency to apply for entrance to a university or university college varies depending on whether they have parents with an academic training or not. The researchers saw three reasons for this. First, children from non-academic families tend to think it is harder to be admitted to a university than it really is. Second, they tend to overestimate the difficulties being a student. And third, they underestimate the economic benefits from having an academic exam.

At a first glance their findings could be seen as just another example of the mechanisms behind social stratification. But the results could also invoke action and break the defeatist attitude among teachers and university staff. Because, if their findings are correct, it would be possible for the universities themselves to do something to change the recruitment patterns. By sending out "student ambassadors", starting information campaigns etc. it would be possible to give a more correct picture of what it takes to be admitted and of the difficulties on the way to an academic exam. Especially at some new university colleges like Malmö and Södertörn, the idea that at least *something* could be done to change age-old patterns inspired teachers and administrators to try to tackle the problem.

Political factors

The question as to what extent political factors play a role in an attitude shift of this kind can be discussed. Are the politicians a driving force in a process, or do they merely follow the flow? Is it of importance which person who holds an office? Or are the politicians just to be seen as representatives of the party or the ideology (or the class) they belong to?

In this case we find it not insignificant that the new trend in Sweden started in 1998, the same year as a new minister of education and science, Tomas Östros, was appointed. He had been a minister of taxation in the social democratic government since 1996, so the Swedish public already knew him, but the sensation was that he now changed to a completely different political domain.

Right from the start he made it very clear that he had put the question of widening participation high on his political agenda. Many found however the new ministers speeches confusing. At the same time as he talked about the need for universities to reach out and recruit students who never had thought of an academic education, he could praise scientific excellence and academic freedom. The quest for widening participation and the need to go for highest possible quality in research and education could by him be mentioned in the same paragraph. This was regarded as strange, especially among journalists who had taken for granted that either you are an *elitist*, who by all means want to keep the universities as exclusive resorts for a small minority of hightbrows, or you are a *populist* that will open the universities for everybody and only show contempt for the inhabitants of the "Ivory Tower".

But Östros' combination of high respect for the academic ideals and pathos for a more open university is not as strange as it might look. As a matter of fact he can be seen as a representative of a long tradition in the Swedish labor movement starting with the first Social Democratic leader, Hjalmar Branting. He, as well as another well-known representative of this tradition, Tage Erlander, had spent many years as students and had good contacts with professors and the academic disciplines all of their lives. According to them a political party that wanted to build a more rational and effective society must hold the universities, and the research done there, in high esteem. The fact that the students at our universities and colleges mainly were recruited from the upper and middle classes were by them seen as a gigantic problem that had to be solved. For Erlander the solution was to minimize the economic costs for an academic education. During his long period as prime minister 1946 – 1969, such things as study loans guaranteed by the state, and later, a general study allowance program were introduced.

Not all Social Democrats have however, been positive to the talk of widening participation. In the Swedish labour movement, as well as in other countries in Europe, there can be found those with an open anti-academic attitude. For them the idea to get working class children interested in higher education is often seen as a conspiracy to deprive the labour movement of their coming leaders, and spread the bourgeois hegemony. Representatives of this attitude have been very rare on top positions in the Swedish Social Democratic party. They have however, often joined forces with another group that can be labelled as *educational technocrats*. Typical for them is that knowledge is seen as a thing, like a chair for example. It is useful to have a chair when you want to sit down, but the chair by no means changes its owner. In the same way, they argued, academic studies can be useful in obtaining important goals, but all claims that liberal education will sharpen the intellect, foster critical thinking and give its bearer better judgement is nonsense. Academic research is by them often labelled "knowledge production" and described as a job just like any other. In the same way undergraduate education is considered a transfer of knowledge in a mechanical way, and they often argue that anyone can be taught anything with the right techniques.

For the educational technocrats the way to widen participation has been to rid the higher education institutions of everything that made them stand out and make them special. Titles in Latin, academic traditions and reference to the Humboldtian ideal has been regarded as obstacles that hindered children from the working class to enter the academic sphere. But there is a problem with this view when it comes to the question of widening participation. Because it is very difficult to put pathos and energy behind a plan to broaden recruitment, if what you want to recruit them to is regarded as "a job among other jobs". Nobody gets upset if farms are taken over by sons and daughters to farmers generation after generation. So why bother if the universities are filled with sons and daughters to academics?

It is possible to argue that for Östros, and those who belong to the pro-academic tradition in the Social Democratic party, the very high esteem with which they embrace the universities and what they stand for, is the

motivating force behind their pathos for widening participation. If academic research and advanced undergraduate education is seen as something very special, then it is easy to be upset over a system that systematically denies a large segment of the population entrance to this world.

Will the present trends last?

If we accept the proposition that the choice of a person to a position such as minister of education is of great importance, then we also will have to accept that the present attitudes to widening participation on state level might change very quickly. A new minister rooted in the educational technocratic tradition might put other questions on top of the agenda.

So far one of the driving forces behind the renewed interest in widening participation in Sweden has been the quick expansion of the higher education system. But sooner or later the expansion must come to a halt, and an ongoing economic recession might even lead to a downsizing of the whole educational sector. Some economist might then show that it is smarter to concentrate the efforts on attracting existing students from other universities, than to try to broaden the recruitment base. Then we may end up in a total market war among the HEIs where everyone is trying to "steal" students from each other.

Even if the recession comes to an end, the idea that education does not really matter might be established as a new economic doctrine, and political theorists and researchers might come up with new arguments *against* a widened participation. Either from the political right, by stating that big class divisions is something good in a society. Or from the left by renewing the old cynicism and assert that despite all efforts we are just reproducing the same old class system by new methods, so why bother?

On the other hand the renewed interest in widening participation in the period of 1999 – 2003 can prove to be the beginning of a long trend in Sweden. Even if there are no more extra money and special commissions, the universities themselves might under these years have seen the gain in having a broad recruitment base. The experiments and projects to reach out to new groups might be turned into stable institutions and established practices that will last even if the political winds are blowing in another directions.

Who knows? Maybe we will have to wait for that historian who fifty years from now will write the history of "The new attitudes to widening participation in Sweden's higher education institutions in the beginning of the 21th century"

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