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The Evaluation Activities of the National Agency for Higher Education in Sweden

Final report by the International Advisory Board

National Agency for Higher Education (Högskoleverket) • Luntmakargatan 13 • Box 7851, SE-103 99
Stockholm • phone: + 46 8 563 085 00 • fax: +46 8 563 085 50 • e-mail: hsv@hsv.se • www.hsv.se

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Contents: Martin Trow (Chair), Mary Henkel, Ernie House, Bente Kristensen, Guy Neave

Contact: National Agency for Higher Education, Evaluations Department, **Staffan Wahlén**

Graphic design: National Agency for Higher Education, Information Department

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Final Report

In 2006 the National Agency will complete the broad review and assessment of Swedish higher education that the Government had asked it to conduct starting in 2001. During these years the Agency has had the help of a variety of groups and individuals outside and independent of the Agency. Among these has been an International Advisory Board whose members and institutional affiliations are shown below.

In this, the final Report of the Advisory Board, we will look briefly backwards at the Agency's first Cycle of reviews of every subject and program in Sweden's universities and colleges. We will also look forward, to the Agency's next program of work that follows on from the successful completion of its first program of evaluation and assessment. During these past five years the Board has met with the Director of the Agency and her senior associates once every year for an intensive three-day meeting. In preparation for these meetings we have been provided with copies in translation of the most important documents produced by the Agency, and with samples of the various reports and communications with the institutions that reflected the on-going relationships of the Agency with the units that it was reviewing, assessing and accrediting. In addition, we were in frequent communication with the Agency senior staff as well as with its Director by email and telephone, as well as with one another. Thus we could express our views to the Agency, its problems and achievements, in a variety of ways, in addition to our annual reports to the Agency.

The Agency has broad responsibility to assess, support and ensure the quality of work in Sweden's colleges and universities, to make known to the Swedish government, current and future students, and the broader society the nature and quality of work in those institutions, and to accredit the degrees and other qualifications awarded by institutions and programs.

The Agency continues to have responsibility for all these functions. But in the next Cycle it is dealing with a different world than it faced when it developed its procedures at the start of the first Cycle in 2001. And for that reason it cannot merely repeat the same procedures. Those procedures were, by general consensus, broadly successful. The Agency achieved a commendable pattern of relations with the institutions it was charged to review and assess. We know this from the self-study reports by the institutions, from the reports of the several independent groups and Boards that the Agency has commissioned to assess its own work, and from our own observations. The Agency has gained this positive judgment basically by the nature of the relationships that it established with the colleges and universities under its purview. Although it has very large statutory powers, it avoided a heavy-handed imposition of judgments and regulations, and over the first Cycle made clear to the institutions that it was primarily interested in helping strengthen the capacities of the institutions themselves to provide high quality education in the various subjects and disciplines offered.

The very success of the first Cycle of institutional reviews has led naturally to suggestions from various quarters that it be repeated. But that view overlooks the changes in the world of Swedish higher education, some of them created by the Agency's own interventions during the first Cycle. In a real sense, the Agency during the past five years has functioned less as a regulatory body and more as a teaching and learning institution, and like all education at its best, changes everything it touches.

The institutions themselves, and their academic leadership, have responded to initiatives by the Agency in a positive and cooperative way, having learned that the Agency in most cases aims at creating an environment and institutional culture that allows the institution to learn more about its own operations, its own successes and relative failures. And it does this through discussion and consultation, rather than through its formal assessments and regulation. The crucial lesson learned by the institutions was that they could discover and discuss with the Agency aspects of their organization or practice in need of improvement without gaining censure from the Agency or attacks on their reputation or budget. That lesson defined the nature of the relationship between the Agency and the institutions, and stands in marked contrast with the relationship between governmental evaluation agencies and institutions of higher education in other countries.

The effect of the Agency's style of work on institutional leadership is reflected in the attitudes of the academic communities within those institutions. The discovery by the academics that the Agency's evaluations were not a threat to their autonomy and academic freedom freed them to cooperate with the Agency in a common effort to strengthen their academic programs. It was crucial to the success of the enterprise that the institutions and the academics themselves not assume the familiar defensive posture of academics in the face of external evaluators, stressing strengths and concealing or minimizing weaknesses.

We have said that in the course of assessing and evaluating educational institutions, the Agency has itself become a forceful educational institution. Through its procedures, above all through the nature of its relationships with the units being evaluated, the units themselves were being transformed, induced or encouraged to strengthen their own capacities for self-criticism and renewal. Not surprisingly, the Agency itself was changing during these years, increasingly seeing and accepting its role as an educative rather than primarily an evaluative or accrediting body. It should be said here that the Agency always recognized that it had certain statutory powers in respect to the institutions of higher education, not least the power to withdraw the authority to grant degrees or other qualifications from subjects or programs when in the Agency's judgment the quality of the unit was not adequate to provide the level of skill or knowledge attested to by the qualification awarded. This "accrediting" power was in fact invoked a number of times during the first Cycle; its very existence was important in many cases where it was not exercised. It was always there as a reserve power, even when not used, or its use threatened but postponed. But subjects or programs in most institutions did not have to worry about a loss of

accreditation, and could turn their energies to the improvement of the fully accredited qualifications that they continue to award.

At the heart of the Agency's conception of its role was its commitment to creating and nurturing a climate within the institutions and subjects of self-criticism and self-improvement. This could not be done by threat or punishment, nor by regulation of the activities of the academics. It required the development of a climate of trust between Agency and the academic community, leaders, teachers and researchers, and students. That took time, and it is fair to say that the Agency itself took some time to fully embrace that conception of its role. But as it did, it changed its own culture and procedures, as did the institutions it was evaluating and increasingly advising, supporting and encouraging.

Similarly, students learned that the evaluations of the subjects and programs were helpful to them in planning their own academic programs, by giving them information on the differences among the various subjects and programs under the same name. This was not only or even primarily a report on the comparative "quality" of different departments in the "same" subject. Rather, it was the dissemination of information, hard or impossible to gain in any other way, about the diverse forms that studies in similar fields and subjects can take in our increasingly specialized and knowledge-rich world. Students could now gain the information they needed to find the best fit between their interests and ambitions and the varied forms that education in their subjects take within Swedish higher education. So the gathering and dissemination of detailed information about the institutions at the level of subject and program where education and training actually occurs, became a major contribution of the first Cycle to the informed planning by students, prospective students, and others interested in their progress. This same information about subjects and programs is obviously also of use by firms in business and industry and the governmental and non-profit organizations who will be their first employers.

The work of the Agency, its gathering and reporting of such detailed information about the work of the units in Swedish colleges and universities which actually do the teaching and research, also provides needed reassurance to the broader society which supports Swedish higher education, and to the political bodies which reflect that society. That reassurance by the Agency about the work of the institutions and the public money spent on them is the basis for the trust that society and government place in those institutions. Where that trust is weak or lacking, governments often replace trust by regulation. And that perversely reduces the prospects for the emergence of a culture of self-criticism and self-improvement within the institutions that is the only basis on which real gains in academic quality can be achieved. A major contribution by the Agency to Swedish higher education over the first Cycle has been by strengthening the trust and confidence in those institutions by the larger society and its governmental representatives, a trust based on the comprehensive information about the colleges and universities and their performance gained by the Agency, and then made widely available.

The necessity for the Agency to develop a different agenda for the second Cycle arises from all the changes within Swedish higher education, in its broader social and political environment, and in the Agency's own capabilities, that we have noted. The next Cycle can and should differ from the first in part because of the successes of the first. A major commitment of the resources of the Agency in the first Cycle went into collecting a mass of information about the institutions and the subjects and programs within them. It should not soon have to do that again. It now can focus some of the energies and resources that went into that massive and necessary information-gathering process on more specific issues and problems that the first Cycle identified. While we have not discussed the Agency's future plans in great detail, it is already clear that some of the energies gained by not having to repeat the broad information collection of the first Cycle can go in two directions. First, the Agency now has a better idea of which programs and subjects have not been developing as quickly or as strongly as have others in the same subject areas. The first Cycle can be seen in a sense as a diagnostic phase, identifying problem areas. The resources released in the second Cycle will allow the Agency to focus on these problem areas, learning how they can be helped to strengthen their work and act on that knowledge. In addition, a major focus of the first Cycle was on the nature of quality-sustaining cultures within the institutions and their constituent units, cultures of attitude, value and procedures that together work toward continuing self-criticism, self-renewal and improvement. But the Agency does not hesitate to admit that it does not know enough about the conditions that give rise to such self-renewing academic cultures, or conversely inhibit their emergence. The freeing of energies in the second Cycle will allow the Agency to focus on this crucial issue of the nature of learning environments, and their self-renewal or decay.

Cycle 2 clearly addresses issues and problems unearthed during Cycle 1; it naturally builds on what has been learned. However as attractive a repetition of Cycle 1 might be – the appeal of the known, the comfortable continuation of a successful relationship – the losses would be great. We have said that the Agency has itself become a learning and teaching institution. That alone ensures its tendency to move and grow and not simply repeat itself. Looked at from another perspective, a repetition of Cycle 1 would blunt the lively spirit of inquiry that marks the work of the Agency, manifested not least in its reluctance to simply repeat its past success. Its readiness to go in some new directions should be applauded; but those new directions are only possible by its not doing some of the things it already has done successfully.

But observers should not fear that the Agency will jettison all of its activities and concerns in the second Cycle. For example, it retains a strong commitment to what it has called "thematic studies," areas of importance that cut across institutions and subjects. These broad thematic concerns: gender and ethnic equality; internationalization, including Swedish relations beyond the EU; the influence of students in all aspects of higher education policy and practice; and the "Third Task," the contribution of higher education to Swedish society beyond institutional borders – these concerns, the Agency assures us, will not

be forgotten in the second Cycle, but will continue to act as informing principles throughout its work. Moreover, the Agency has discussed with us the possibility of developing one or two further topics for thematic studies. Among these are the changing demands on the academic profession, and the changing conditions of employment in the institutions, reflected in more short term and part-time contracts. Another such area is the development of distance learning and its implications.

Those “themes” were seen as part of a Swedish idea of higher education, forcefully developed and encouraged by the Agency. But today substantial forces impinge on Swedish higher education that arise outside Sweden, most noticeably the obligations associated with the agreements forged in Bologna that call on all EU countries to make changes in their systems of higher education that will allow (among other things) easier movement of teachers, and especially of students, among the colleges and universities of Europe. The work of the Agency in the first Cycle and its results are especially timely in light of what appears to be a theme in the Bologna process that shifts the emphasis on higher education throughout the EU from external control and regulation to the development of greater responsibility by institutions of higher education for their own quality control. The work of the Swedish Agency along these lines may be of great help to the Bologna process, where these matters are still more expressions of hope than of deep understanding or the practical application of ideas.

So clearly, not only has Swedish higher education changed in the past five years, but so also has its international environment. In ways that our colleague Guy Neave discusses in the Annex attached to this Report, the Bologna agreements require a Swedish response. In addition to all the other changes the Agency will face in the second Cycle, Bologna enters as another challenge that requires new responses.

These reflections lead this Board to recommend that the Agency be allowed to pursue its plans and proposals for its second Cycle of reviews of Swedish colleges and universities, plans that embody new approaches to the changes it faces in Sweden and internationally.

Respectfully submitted,
Mary Henkel, Brunel University
Ernest House, University of Colorado
Bente Kristensen, Copenhagen Business School.
Guy Neave, University of Twente
Martin Trow, University of California, Chair

ANNEX:

On Looking forward to Innovation, Consolidation and Progress: A Short Saga of Organizational Anticipation

Bis repetitur non placet.
(Old Latin Saw)

Prologue

This document is submitted as an Annex to the Final Report of the International Advisory Board. It provides a complementary perspective, which in no way departs, still less dissents, from the Board's collective opinions and judgment. To both, I am proud to have been able to contribute and would take this opportunity to add thanks both personal and heartfelt, for the pleasure of having served the National Agency and to have been privileged to do so in company as stimulating, enjoyable as it has been uncompromising in the views it dissected and those it endorsed.

These views figure in the main text. They are the considered judgment on events and developments in the past – the very recent past, it is true. Such views have been forged to contribute to debate and decisions now – hic et nunc. The present document, however, dwells upon a slightly different perspective. It is no less concerned with today's developments and issues facing Sweden's universities. But it differs in that it is concerned with the very near future. It focuses on events that are unfolding as we spoke and as we write. It starts from a common core. That common core is the Final Report. This Annex, however, is forward looking. It seeks to wind the very near future back into those considerations which reasonable foresight demands that account should be taken in the present. Because of this variation in perspective and because the International Advisory Board did not broach this issue as such, though in the five years of our mandate, the Board's discussions touched upon a good many dimensions that bear upon it. For this reason, it is appropriate to present this analysis as an Annex.

Introduction

Change, flexibility, adaptation and quality are the central features of today's higher education, irrespective of the particular land to which one directs one's attention. Sweden is no exception. Over the past five years, it has been our privilege closely to observe how Sweden through the work of the Högskoleverket,

has come to grips with this urgent drive to ensure the Nation is fitted out with the qualities, structures, procedures and practices that place it amongst the leading examples of a vibrant and competitively sustainable system of learning, research and innovation – all of which are prerequisites for meeting successfully the demands of a society committed to taking its place in the global Knowledge Economy.

One Form of Progress: Reconstructing Higher Education in Europe

These five years also coincide with what, without exaggeration, may be presented as the most complex reforms in the history of the Universities of Europe since their foundation more than 900 years ago. (Neave, 2005a) The Bologna Process is an undertaking of immense importance on account of its scope and its complexity. In the arena of higher education, it is intended to give a solid underpinning to the European Union; to open new opportunities for student choice, to enlarge ‘the student experience’, to create new openings for cross nation research and other forms of academic work and, at a broader level still, to re-state Europe’s position in the global economy.

Over the six years since the Ministers responsible for higher education set their hand to the Bologna Declaration in June 1999, political mobilisation has proceeded a-pace, though the response at institutional level has been varied. (Schwartz-Hahn & Rehberg, 2004; Reichert & Tausch, 2003; Neave, 2005b and 2005c) The Berlin communiqué of 2003 added the research dimension to the agenda to what is nothing less than the reconstruction of higher education in Europe.

These are momentous decisions. And though every Nation will interpret them and adapt them to its own very specific circumstances, there are certain common objectives and shared features in the shape of standardized study duration, the stratification and often further sub division of qualifications, [Witt, 2004] quite apart from those objectives, more susceptible to ambiguous operationalisation such as ‘employability’. As many universities in the European Union are coming to realise, installing such common dimensions is a complex and very often time consuming process (Amaral & Veiga, 2004; Dubois, 2004; Schwartz Hahn & Rehberg, 2004) Bringing study programmes into alignment with a standard European template demands revision in timing, schedule and very often changes in the distribution of curricular content. In the Swedish case, it will also demand the extension of accreditation procedures to the Master’s degree. Such adjustments, which are mentioned only as illustrations rather than as an exhaustive list, have implications for both evaluation and audit. These have been progressively negotiated as part of the first and second cycles of departmental assessment and self-evaluation by Sweden’s universities in dialogue with the Högskoleverket. Much has been learned by both parties and we comment later on this particular aspect.

Internationalisation

Bologna brings with it specific priorities and officially at least, sets deadlines for the basic terms of the Declaration to be met. And whilst it may be argued that the specifics of what is now termed 'the Bologna Process' are reaching out to embrace issues additional to those drawn up in June 1999, it remains for all that a strategically central sous ensemble of a broader issue – that of the internationalisation of knowledge and thus the reinforcement of the international dimension in higher education generally.

It is a matter of record and in our annual reports we have had cause to note it, that Sweden has had a commitment to 'internationalisation' reaching back over the past quarter century. Sweden's commitment to international outreach has progressed along three axes: close and sustained exchange and dialogue within the Nordic countries; bi-lateral relationships with its European neighbours prior to joining the European Union; last and very certainly the most remarkable, an abiding and self-imposed obligation to aiding and assisting development in the countries of the Southern hemisphere.

Bologna: a Different Kettle of Fish

Important though these engagements have been and remain, we would argue that they are in essence very different from the engagement to which, formally, Sweden adhered as one of the signatories of the Bologna Declaration. Whereas earlier engagements were very largely shaped by considerations and action identified and determined in keeping with Sweden's perception of its own obligations and in keeping with the capacities it was ready to mobilise and bring to bear on priorities domestically fixed, the Bologna Process marks a radical departure in two respects.

First, the terms of Sweden's engagement to Bologna, whilst certainly agreed to, have yet to be negotiated into the structure and tissue of Swedish higher education. As we have remarked, such negotiations will call for very substantial effort by all social partners, government, universities and their three Estates, academic, administrative and student. It will call for adjustment to goals, which, though endorsed by Sweden, are not wholly determined by Sweden. The six basic objectives of the Bologna Declaration will demand an effort all the greater and more pressing since they are scheduled – at least officially – for completion by 2010. The schedule is, in effect, externally fixed.

A Little Recognized Dimension

There is a second feature of the Bologna Process and though it is not widely recognized, it appears still less to have been taken fully into account when adding to the growing agenda associated with the Bologna Process itself. This second feature has immediate and direct implications both for higher education in Sweden and for the Agencies, which negotiate strategic adjustment of Sweden's

system of higher education to the ever-pressing demands of society and of the economy. This little recognized but indispensable dimension has direct and immediate implications across many domains – and as we have suggested above, they are not the least insignificant. Succinctly stated, Bologna has proceeded apace with very little – if any – attempt to assess beforehand the capacity of higher education systems to assimilate and successfully to implement even the six basic objectives – let alone the supplementary domains and components that have been added subsequently. (Neave, 2002; 2005c) A case could be made for arguing that this latter task falls to national authorities, on the grounds that they are best suited to making this judgment and acting accordingly; that such an estimation does not fall into the domain of identifying long term objectives and determining overall priorities for action in the future but rather stands as part of the process of implementation and execution.

The Capacity to make Bricks without Straw

Be that as it may, such an estimation of capacity, of the resources – human very certainly, capital always in short supply and equipment additional to that already to hand – is an imperative prior condition for all systems of higher education, though it has to be said that not all systems of higher education have necessarily recognized these conditioning factors or even made budgetary provision for them. [Boffo, 2004] If constructing the European Higher Education Area and its research counterpart, the European Research Area, which are the operational outcomes of the broader political and on-going process coalescing around Bologna, are to proceed according to the schedule fixed for the initial programme laid down in June 1999, such an exercise cannot be avoided, and very particularly so in view of budgetary constraints that are the daily lot of governments and universities. Not to undertake such a prior assessment is tantamount to demanding that higher education, like the Children of Israel during the exile in Egypt, ‘make bricks without straw’. As a parenthesis, one could point out that this is precisely the condition currently faced by Italian universities. [Boffo, 2004]

Such arguments stated in abstracto take on a very particular acuteness when placed in the Swedish context. Though not often recognized as such, the capacity to take on new commitments is directly and indelibly linked in the Swedish setting with the fundamental issue of quality. Stated crudely, is it possible to add further to institutional mission, expand the administrative task and lay new responsibilities upon academic work and, at the same time remain uncompromising over the quality previously demonstrated when such demands were previously either voluntarily assumed or were not taken into account in assessing institutional provision as a matter of national policy? Whether there is indeed institutional capacity to take the Bologna agenda on board is a central issue and very especially when money is short, when the academic estate is on the one hand, ageing and on the other increasingly subject to part-time and precarious conditions of employment. (Enders & de Weert, 2005; Neave, 2005c)

These factors are not exclusive to Sweden. Rather more relevant, however, is the fact that such factors are identified in Sweden as having direct bearing on quality and are not simply confined to the domain of logistics and resources. Why this is so is not difficult to explain, even though it has to be said that the direct association between capacity and quality is not so readily admitted elsewhere. Yet, because logistic capacity is also specifically associated by the Högskoleverket with the capacity to uphold quality – indeed, it is one of the major lessons that the Agency has retained from the two rounds of evaluation and audit between 1999 and 2003 – so injecting Bologna as an item to be included in the quality agenda, also makes certain demands and changes upon that agenda.

Agency Initiatives

We note with approval that the Agency has already begun to turn its attention to the implications that Internationalisation in general¹ and Bologna more specifically pose for the Agency's relationship with its partners in higher education, for the more technical but no less sensitive domain of auditing and for the type of information as well as its point of focus that follow from internationalisation's assuming an increasing weight in the operational concerns of Agency and university.

The Second Cycle of reviewing promises to be a lighter but no less rigorous exercise than its predecessor. The choice of which programmes to be reviewed will, we were told, could be made by random choice, by lottery or on the basis of statistical indicators. Another possibility would be to identify programmes for scrutiny from the information contained in the Student Mirror – an elegant completion of the 'information cycle' in which stakeholder opinion serves as a feed-back loop to the process of institutional self-improvement. The number of programmes reviewed will be curtailed and will involve only on those programmes that may be said to be 'at risk' of seeing their validation to award degrees withdrawn. The change in programme coverage in the Second Round will go hand in hand with a lightening of both procedures and work-load. Institutional self-evaluation is to be limited to ten pages and the time taken for the review and reporting process reduced to six months. Another innovation is to be seen in opening the selection of reviewers to a wider geographical coverage than was the case in the First Cycle. Whilst the First Cycle did indeed draw upon scholarly opinion from outside Sweden, this tended to be confined within the Nordic countries, mainly on grounds of language. Since self-evaluation reports in the Second Cycle will be in English, the way is opened to seek farther field. Drawing on the experience of leading North American universities was mentioned.

All these initiatives are necessary for policy-making at national and institutional levels. In a situation rapidly evolving, they provide additional dimensions

1. For this see Högskoleverket [nd. 2004?]] A Higher Education System without Frontiers? On Internationalisation of Undergraduate and Postgraduate Studies, (mimeo).

to that element central to Swedish ‘quality culture’ which we perceive as species of shorthand for that broad process of learning, organizing and assimilating the capacity for self-improvement. This central element is the regular informing of students and other stakeholders. To our way of thinking, a key aspect in re-focusing is the proposed shift mooted in respect of developments to be associated with the second cycle towards a somewhat greater weight to be attached to outcomes over and above the present configuration on how quality is organized, provided and implemented within the individual department. In short, the first cycle of evaluation and audit had as its purpose the nurturing of excellence. The purpose of the second cycle is to sustain it.

We also note the intention to lay down firmer links between evaluation and monitoring and the increasing weight to be set on gathering standardized indicators. The strategic purpose behind this move is clear. In the immediate future, it is to reduce the burden of both subject and programme evaluation, but retaining sufficient sensitivity to permit ‘threshold’ action to be taken and sufficient to provide conclusive evidence that such actions as issuing warnings or the withdrawal of the right to award degrees, are warranted. Gouverner, c’est prévoir.

Tensions and the ‘Self-Denying Ordinance’

Both the Agency and Sweden’s universities have negotiated – and we have remarked on this many occasions in the course of our previous reports – a definition of quality which, in our studied view, is operationally highly effective in grounding a ‘quality culture’ into institution and basic units. Moreover, this quality construct is one the ownership and legitimacy of which are fully recognized as underwriting the principle of institutional autonomy by academia itself. Both the Agency and the university have learned well from their sustained dialogue. The former recognizes the benefit of what is perhaps best described as a policy-style based on the notion of a ‘self denying ordinance’². That is, Högskoleverket places voluntarily restrictions on the powers that its mandate and legislation place upon it. At the same time, it does not renounce those powers³. Sanction is present. It is a powerful and persuasive tool. But its power and persuasion are proportionate to the parsimony with which sanction is wielded. The

2. For aficionados and the curious, the Self Denying Ordinance was passed by the English Parliament on April 3rd 1645. It stipulated that in time of war, no Member of Parliament could hold military office or for that matter any other office appointed by Parliament. Its purpose was to remove certain aristocratic Generals in the ranks of the Parliamentarians, who were somewhat reluctant to inflict defeat on the King, Charles I, then busily engaged in waging civil war with his subjects. By extension, a Self Denying Ordinance is a situation in which an individual or body, having the right and capacity to do something, decides unilaterally not to make use of it.

3. A striking example of Högskoleverket invoking its powers to deal with a passably unsatisfactory situation may be seen in the case of teacher training programmes. The Agency’s response was to call for an evaluation within the year of the quality of degree submissions in this area with a follow-up evaluation two years later. On the basis of the second evaluation, institutions failing to take full account of quality requirements risk their entitlement to award degrees. Högskoleverket (no date 2005?) The National Agency’s Reflections, (mimeo).

universities, for their part, have learned that there are other and more mutually beneficial ways of doing things together that cannot be seen simply in terms of bureaucratic heavy-handedness or inquisitorial intervention.

Recent Initiatives

Whilst we readily understand the reasons that lie behind the recent suggestion by university Vice Chancellors and students that the established pattern of evaluation, so successfully conducted, be continued, we would venture to point out that there are other issues at stake. We would also recognize, if only for the fact that we have made the point ourselves in one of our earlier reports, that the risk cannot wholly be discounted that a quality culture, which has gone to considerable pains to avoid procedural sclerosis through varying the focus on what is evaluated – and the recourse to thematic evaluations honing in on such issues as gender equality, ‘Third Tasks’ and Internationalization have played an essential part in both ringing the changes and holding the formalization that comes of routine at bay – may well find it difficult in the extreme to maintain its relevance, sensitivity and flexibility when faced with normative requirements upheld by other systems of evaluation, grounded in an evaluatory mode that turns around output and performance and in which homogeneity, conformity, procedural rigidity and compliance, all flourish and triumph. And very especially so, when more formalized procedures and approaches command a majority at the European level.

Threat

The threat that Bologna poses to the culture of trust and confidence that the Högskoleverket has built up with Sweden’s universities lies very precisely in the fact that, as they function at present, by far the overwhelming majority of European systems for quality assurance and accreditation are constructed around outcomes and their dissemination to the public made in the form of League Tables, ranking of institutions, departments and disciplines in terms of these outcomes. The point of tension this construction represents is, of course, that the operational ‘integration’ of Sweden into the European dimension in this specific domain will entail the obligation to conform to majority practice. From this it follows that if, to meet ‘European standards’, both outcomes and ranking practices are taken aboard, it is not out of place to ask whether such an initiative will not undermine the very culture of confidence that grew up around the Högskoleverket’s explicit and resolute dismissal in the first cycle of both outcomes and League tables. Though we have had cause many times in the course of our reporting to admire the culture of confidence and, indeed have reiterated this view in our collective opinion to which this annex is attached, we do not know how far such a relationship is – in French parlance, a *droit acquis* – a permanent and ineradicable feature of Swedish academia. Reverting to outcomes as a possible consequence of negotiating the Bologna process into Sweden’s higher

education landscape may be questionable on grounds that it may also entail that perverse effect – as it has in other systems notorious for their trust in outcomes rather than in academia – of fragilising the culture of trust.

We do not state this as a hard and fast truth, still less as a prophetic utterance. Much will depend on how many of the operational criteria associated with judgment qua outcome by other European systems of evaluation will be identified, negotiated, and promulgated and applied in Sweden. And it is certain that we can make no predictions here. What one may postulate is the possibility of a certain threshold in the range of outcome-based criteria taken on board beyond which confidence may be undermined and below which an accommodation may be struck without damaging the creative dialogue that has grown up between Högskoleverket and higher education. It is important therefore to ascertain where this threshold exists and what outcome criteria, already employed as routine in other national systems in the European Union, are acceptable to Sweden's higher education and to its government. Much more to the point, this exercise in 'institutional intelligence-gathering', assumes a special and particular urgency as the Bologna Process itself migrates from the realm of inter-governmental and inter-agency haggling to being part of the procedures incorporated into national evaluation. We will return later to the question of negotiation and defining the acceptability of outcomes that European instances might wish Sweden to accommodate.

Bis Repetitur Non Placet

Given the particular context in which the Bologna Process is sited in Sweden and its urgency, our view of the proposal to repeat as part of the Second Cycle those procedures forged in the course of the first, echoes the Latin proverb of old, is 'Bis repetitur non placet'⁴ The grounds for this opinion, however, do not lie so much with the repetition of the exercise because we cannot be utterly certain that, in itself, repetition invariably leads straightway down the slippery path towards routinisation, tokenism in the replies given and bureaucratization, though the experience of other countries – notably the United Kingdom – suggests that continual re-use of the same instruments for evaluation does give rise to such an unvirtuous circle. Similar conclusions have been drawn in the Netherlands. (Scheele, Maassen & Westerheijden, 1998; Jeliaskova & Westerheijden, 2000) Rather, our grounds for this cautionary note are different. They have to do very precisely with what we conceive in terms of the upholding – or, in more dramatic terms, the preservation – of those features of the Swedish 'quality culture' that appear to us to be unique and thus an important potential contribution to extending a wider debate on the future development of quality assurance within the European Union itself. To do this requires that attention be paid by all those responsible for the good husbandry and working of Sweden's quality assurance mechanism to the relationship, boundaries and balance bet-

4. Things repeated twice are not pleasing.

ween the domestic system of quality assurance and accreditation procedures and the place that they may wish to assign to those elements in the Bologna Process the terms of which must be negotiated into the Swedish setting.

Mobilisation and Repositioning

Over the past two years or so, the Högskoleverket has moved into this domain via the thematic evaluations and very particularly the one dealing broadly with Internationalization. Furthermore, we are told that certain establishments have already taken the initiative to put the basic Bologna structures – that is, the 3+5+8 pattern of study duration – in place. That this is so is a tribute to the reality of institutional initiative that the Swedish Quality Assurance model underwrites. It is also an indication as clear as ever one might wish that the issue of negotiating the ‘broader package’ which Bologna now involves into the Swedish setting ought not to be delayed further. Arguably, the weight placed upon thematic evaluations with a national rather than an institutional basis – this latter being what some in the universities are pressing to retain – begins the next stage of mobilizing Swedish higher education. Having secured the domestic front, attention must now turn towards the implications for quality of Sweden’s reaching out to Europe and at the same time, consolidating its extra European attractiveness.

It would seem to us, however, that this strategic re-positioning, the further revision in evaluatory procedures and focus cannot be avoided. Nor should it be if Sweden is to secure the place it feels it should have in the European Union. Equally, however, we recognize that, whilst the proposed shift towards some outcomes rather than provision, to looking at the university as a whole, to strengthening the national perspective, to the issues of cooperation between universities and the issue of concentrating human resources – a species of ‘staff clustering’ – all of which set the second evaluatory cycle off from its predecessor, stand as prior conditions to Sweden’s turning outward. Therefore, we do not share the view that there is virtue in continuing with ‘the tried and tested’, though we are naturally sensitive to the power of the appeal. The prime consideration that shapes our views is severely practical – even pragmatic.

Pragmatism

This pragmatism in turn is founded on a number of observations that feed our convictions. Making the second evaluatory cycle lighter, focusing on fewer institutions and placing greater confidence in the self-evaluatory capacity of individual establishments is a logical outcome that reflects successfully ‘embedding’ the procedural aspect of the culture of quality in Sweden’s higher education establishments. It also reflects the readiness on the part of the three Estates in higher education to ‘speak truth to power’. Making procedures lighter is a very real endorsement of the trust that exists between Agency and academia. It rests on the assumption that institutions will continue to wish to show their

readiness and their ability to meet the demands of external society, strengthened yet further by intensified ties with their proximate community, which the Third Task represents. The pragmatic aspect – and to us it appears undeniable – is not a question of priorities alone. Sweden certainly has the choice of how, in what form and on what terms it will engage with the outer world. Therein lies choice and decision.

The impression we retain from our knowledge of negotiations between national authorities and those European interests and agencies that see themselves as Guardians of the Bologna Process is that very little long term preparation and fundamental thinking-through of the consequences of this process are made prior to sitting down formally to celebrate its inevitable advance as was the case in May at Bergen. Still less attention is paid to fleshing the operational dimension out in terms that are relevant to those called upon to implement it – to wit, the institutions, departments and Faculties in higher education. We have no reason to believe that this situation pertains in Sweden. But if the Swedish ‘model’ of quality assurance is to be represented in the negotiations with Bologna’s Guardians from a position of strength, then it is as well to ascertain beforehand and this from those most intimately interested in what such negotiations entail.

In short, amongst the range of outcome criteria held as necessary by Bologna’s Guardians, which are acceptable to Swedish academia? Which may be accepted without jeopardizing the culture of confidence and which, in the opinion of Sweden’s universities, their leadership, scholars and students, are likely to place the Swedish model in harm’s way. It strikes us that this is a vital and necessary exercise. Högskoleverket can very certainly undertake it give the legitimacy it already enjoys vis a vis its university partners. This same exercise, however, also requires an equal engagement, on the basis of information gathered before hand at the institutional level, amongst those instances that shape the broad, national and strategic framework in Education and which set the frame in Sweden within which Högskoleverket operates. As with wedlock, so with Bologna: one haggles in haste. One repents at leisure.

In Guise of a Conclusion

Yet, it is unthinkable that Sweden should not wish to engage further in international outreach. Indeed, the Nation has long been committed to – and is already embarked on – such a course. Where the choices lie is where that outreach is to be developed further: with the Nordic lands, with developing countries, with ‘the Continent’ now calling itself the European Union? And in what balance? Time, energy and expertise are needed to weigh up pros and cons just as they are needed to determine the balance of any further commitment across these three geographic areas. Each demands a very different policy and represents very different challenges to the Nation, to its system of higher education and, as we have intimated, to the system, which informs the Nation of the quality it commands in learning and in research.

Time, energy and resources are needed to clarify what such commitments mean, severally, separately or in combination, in terms of resources to be marshalled– human, financial or matériel – if higher education is to do its part. Faced with so central a strategic choice, it is, in our view, more efficient and very certainly in the interests of Swedish higher education in the medium to long term, to free energy and expertise now to clarify the options that will have to be picked and defended in the near future.

That is why we believe that abiding by the procedures of reviewing as they developed in the First Cycle is not to be preferred. Time saved frees resources to deal with Internationalisation, *grosso modo*. Confirming the past whilst turning one's gaze aside from the future can never be advised. Indeed, given the remarkable ability that Sweden has displayed of planning in the long term – a national trait so often noted by outside observers – it strikes us as more than strange that we should find ourselves obliged to revert to so elemental a truth. *Bis repetitur non placet*. Indeed.

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