

The National Reviews of Swedish Higher Education

Report by the International Advisory Committee to the
National Agency for Higher Education in Sweden

Martin Trow, Chair
Mary Henkel, Ernie House, Bente Kristensen, Guy Neave

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The National Reviews of Swedish Higher Education, The International Advisory Committee to the National Agency for Higher Education

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Preface

One of the primary tasks of the National Agency for Higher Education since 2001 has been to prepare and implement a system of evaluating all subjects and program leading to a degree at Swedish higher education institutions as well as to further develop the model of quality audit of institutions introduced in 1995.

It goes without saying that an organization responsible for such a large undertaking must also submit its system and methodology both to its own reflections and to external scrutiny. It is necessary that the model is not static but that it keeps developing as we gain experience and further knowledge. To that end, the Agency has arranged for two kinds of evaluations of its own activities. One is an assessment by a group of Swedish researchers of the first year of program and subject reviews. The group's report, which was published in the Agency's series in June 2002 (Högskoleverkets rapportserie 2002:20R), provided a basis for further work¹. The other is the appointment of an international team of experts (the Agency's Advisory Board). This group, includes the following scholars

- Professor Martin Trow, University of California at Berkeley (Chair)
- Professor Mary Henkel, Brunel University, England
- Professor Ernie House, University of California at Boulder
- Professor Guy Neave, the European University Association
- Professor Bente Kristensen, the Copenhagen Business School

The Advisory Board has followed our endeavours for almost two years now, and we have had three meetings with the Board, as well as occasional discussions with the Chair and individual members. A first report was presented in October 2001². This is the second report, also based on a thorough reading of various documents pertaining to the reviews, such as summaries of evaluation reports, the Agency's own analyses of the first round of reviews and of the above-mentioned meta-evaluation report. The Board has conducted discussions with officers of the Agency, the meta-evaluators and those responsible for the overall structure of the reviews. These efforts have resulted in the raising of a number of salient and important issues and in helpful comments and advice. The points highlighted in the Report concern the nature and implementation of various aspects of the Swedish review model.

¹ It might be pointed out that some of the conclusions are based on conditions prevailing during the first few reviews and that a number of changes had already been introduced, most of them along the lines proposed by the meta-evaluators.

² The report is available from the National Agency for Higher Education, Box 7851, 103 99 Stockholm, or hsv.hsv.se.

- The institutions' (departments') self-studies
- Audits
- Staff development in the institutions
- Managing tensions
- Evaluation and changing institutional cultures

We are indeed happy to recognise the insight and perspicacity of the Report. It demonstrates an impressive understanding of the peculiarities and intricacies of the Swedish system of higher education and the current models of review, combined with an international perspective. It will certainly be the subject of many deliberations at the Agency as we continue to improve our evaluation methods in consultation with the institutions of higher education.



Sigbrit Franke
The University Chancellor

Summary

This is the second report by the International Advisory Committee to the National Agency for Higher Education.

The points highlighted in the report concern the nature and implementation of various aspects of the Swedish review model, in particular

- The institutions' (departments') self-studies
- Audits
- Staff development in the institutions
- Managing tensions
- Evaluation and changing institutional cultures

The Committee suggests that the Agency should give clearer instructions and follow the self-study process at the institutions more closely in order that it should result in more deliberation and self-reflection.

The institutional audits developed by the Agency in the mid-1990's are still part of the Swedish quality assurance model, although the focus is now on program and subject review. It is important that the lessons learnt in the quality audits should be taken into account and utilised. The Committee therefore recommends that the Agency should use the audit reports to bring together representatives of 'best practise' institutions and institutions which still have to learn with the aim of transferring examples of "best practise", taking into account the differences of learning environments.

The Report discusses the tensions inherent in the evaluation model chosen. One of these is between ensuring comparability between different educational providers, recognising the multi-dimensional nature of quality and encouraging diversity in higher education. The Committee finds that the process of dialog and negotiation between the Agency and the institutions ensures that this tension is well resolved.

The second problem concerns evaluating rapidly changing disciplines recognising that they cannot be seen in the same light as traditional areas. The Committee maintains that the Agency could better encourage subject provider to show clearly how far they are modifying or expanding disciplinary frameworks, thus pointing the way towards a coherent alternative principle for subject review.

Finally, the Report discusses the role of stakeholders and emphasises the facts that higher education in Sweden is a public good and that the purpose of evaluation is not confined solely to providing value for money. There is also a long-term and future-oriented perspective, which is recognised in the evaluation reports. The Committee also finds that the Agency is aware of the risk of a culture of compliance and secret dissent and that the way universities view their role is of paramount importance. The Agency, in turn, is aided in its role by one of the characteristics of Swedish political culture, which turns around prior negotiation and consensus building.

Introduction: The Swedish Model

The Swedish model of review and evaluation in higher education has two faces. On one hand are its prescribed purposes and implementation procedures. On the other are the ways in which these procedures are actually carried on – the more subtle element which includes the culture of Swedish modes of governance, the culture of the Agency, the various cultures of the institutions of higher education, and the ways in which these cultures interact. The term “culture” here is a shorthand for the norms and values which are largely unspoken, unexpressed in the various documents that flow back and forth in connection with these reviews, but which largely determine *how* the formal activities of the Agency are actually carried out and responded to by the units under review. One aspect of culture is the *tone* of these documents, the degree to which they express respect for the other parties in the review, or assert authority of one party over the other, take on the tone of command, and so forth. Both the formal purposes and implementation procedures, *and* the informal cultural expression they take are present in shaping the nature and effectiveness of this whole exercise of departmental and program reviews.

Without being exhaustive, the main formal elements of this exercise, as we understand them, are:

- A continuation of the existing program of audits of the self-improvement work, the quality enhancement work, of the universities and university colleges.
- The review over six years of every department and program in Sweden’s universities, university colleges and other institutions of higher education.

These reviews involve, at minimum:

- a self-study by the unit under review;
- a visit to the unit by a review committee comprised of academics/students from other departments/programs and a member of the Agency;
- a report by the Agency to the subject department/program, with copies to the Ministry and other interested parties;
- a summary report on the state of that subject/professional field in Swedish higher education available to all interested parties, including prospective students and their parents, the public press, and potential employers in the public and private sectors;
- the accreditation of the unit under review.

The manifest intent of this set of operations is: a. the improvement of teaching/learning in the departments and institutions under review, as well as b. an increase in information available to all parties which have an interest in the nature and quality of Swedish higher education. The latter includes

information and guidance to the Ministry and Government which has ultimate responsibility for Swedish higher education, as well as to the various stakeholders in the larger society who have an interest in the nature and quality of education in Sweden's institutions of higher education.

In the service of that commitment, the Agency is empowered to withdraw from specific departments/programs the right to award degrees in those departments/programs which it deems unable to teach to the required standard; alternatively, it can delay such authorization in cases where improvement is deemed possible. So the review exercise is at once evaluative, consultative, and accreditive.

This Committee has recently completed its second round of meetings with members and leaders of the Agency for Higher Education which is charged with carrying out the mandates from the government regarding this exercise. As is characteristic of Swedish Government, the Agency responsible for the implementation has a certain measure of freedom and discretion in how it carries out its directives.

In our review of how the Agency has been carrying out its mandate, we have been impressed with how skillfully and sensitively the Agency has been dealing with the inherent and potentially difficult tensions built into its mandate. In our own visits and conversations at the Agency, we have been looking both at the formal obligations of the Agency in this exercise, and at the culture of the system which includes the Government and Ministry, the Agency, the university colleges and universities themselves, and the society to which all are responsible.

We will speak about these tensions inherent in these reviews more fully below. But one way to summarize them is to point to the distinction between "development" and "control." "Development" is a shorthand way of pointing to all the activities, meetings and decisions aimed at enhancing the quality of teaching/learning within an institution or department/program through discussion and the building of cooperative relationships between the institutions and the Agency. "Control" points to the powers that the Agency brings to these reviews, made up in part of the power to withhold or delay the authority to grant degrees in the subject, but also its power to write and circulate the evaluative reports which are explicitly designed to influence both governmental policy and private decisions by students, parents and employers.

We know from experience in other countries that "development" and "control" can be at odds; at the barest minimum, the power of control motivates a department to show itself in its most favorable light to a review, while "development" requires the unit to explore its own shortcomings and failures, and to share those insights with the required committees through its self-study and in its meetings with them. It is the resolution of these contradictory patterns of response by units under review to the exercise that poses the biggest challenge to the Agency, one that has not been successfully resolved in many other countries.

Our summary judgment, after seeing the exercise in operation after roughly a year and a half since its inception in January 2001 is that the Agency has navigated these difficult waters with great skill. In the course of so doing it has created templates, precedents, models for the work of the next few years which embody norms underlying its conceptions of the exercise. These give the reviews a measure of consistency, and provide baselines for ongoing improvements of the reviews, which could not be possible if there were no structure and consistency in the reviews already completed. Among the major positive developments of the past year, in our view, are these:

The Agency has mastered the logistics of this very large exercise, and is able to meet its review targets within acceptable levels of quality.

It has given to the dimension of “development” in its work a substantive meaning: the intent to change the culture of departments, programs and institutions in ways that lead to stronger capacities and instruments for self-criticism and self-improvement.

It has learned that the exercise of “control,” the power and threat to disaccredit a unit, is both important and marginal. That is to say, it exercises this power marginally, at a relatively small number of departments and institutions, though the existence of that power is crucial in its discussions and advice to units which are not in danger of disaccreditation, but need improvement. One estimate by the Agency leadership of its relationships with the units under review was that 90 per cent of them involved discussion aiming at strengthening the culture of self-criticism and self-improvement in the unit under review; that perhaps 9 per cent involved in addition warnings to the unit about specific improvements that had to be made to earn renewal of accreditation of the degree on re-examination after some months; and that only 1 per cent of its activities led to the disaccreditation of the unit, the withdrawal of its right to grant degrees in its subject. These were not accurate numerics, but rough indications of the Agency’s own perception of the outcome of its reviews since the inception of this exercise. But that says a great deal: it says in fact that the Agency sees its central role as changing the culture of the educational units under review, or strengthening that culture of self-criticism and improvement where it already was functioning.

That commitment to cultural change in the unit assumes a high measure of autonomy on the part of the units and of the institutions of which they are part; surely no culture of self-government and self-improvement can emerge when the unit is simply responding to firm instructions from an outside authority about how it should behave. The Agency has chosen to relate to the units as if they were governed by professional rather than bureaucratic norms – ie., fundamentally self-governing rather than responsive to rules coming down a hierarchy of authority. That in our view is the most important decision it has made. The great danger in a program of accountability from above is the deprofessionalization of the institution and its members. Sweden and the Agency are apparently not going down that road.

In the remainder of this Report we will be discussing the following issues, among others. We do not mean to be exhaustive; there are other issues and problems that perhaps deserve discussion. But these are the issues that have caught our attention and on which we have something to say in this Second Report:

- The self-study
- Audits and staff development
- Managing tensions
- Evaluation and changing institutional cultures

The self-study

The self-study is at the core of the Swedish evaluation model for higher education. It serves as the main opportunity for reflection and deliberation by the department under review, and it also serves as a major document guiding the outside disciplinary review team. From talks with the staff and the meta-evaluators, it appears that the self-study is constrained by three factors. Frequently, not enough time is given to discussion and deliberation within the unit itself. This is not so much a problem of the time line for the self-study as not having enough time scheduled for discussion within the department. Second, sometimes the people who should be engaged in discussing the future of the department are not involved. In some cases only one person prepares and writes the self-study report. Clearly, this defeats the purpose of encouraging reflection within the unit. Third, sometimes the self-study report is written more as a defensive document rather than as a deliberative document. In other words, the department attempts to put its best face forward at the expense of self-reflection.

We would hope to encourage more deliberation and self-reflection in the self-study process. This might be done by the Agency staff making sure that the appropriate people are engaged in the self-study development process; by distributing duties for the self-study among several people within the department; by scheduling timely sessions for departmental deliberation; and by emphasizing the importance of taking time to reflect. Who should be involved in discussing, developing, and writing the self-study report? Surely, several key people who represent different positions and points of view in the department should be actively engaged, and their identities should be part of the self-study report. Also, both graduate and undergraduate students should play a role. It is difficult to see how the self-study process can be reflective when only one or two people do all the work. Nor can extensive deliberation and reflection result from simply passing the completed report around for comments. Furthermore, several sessions should be scheduled to discuss the content of the self-study. Although there is no denying that the self-study serves a dual purpose in that it also contributes to the monitoring Agency, at least equal emphasis should be focused on the reflective nature of the evaluation exercise, not just the monitoring task.

In short, the self-study should include the right people, be carried out through extensive dialogues among people in the unit, and culminate in serious deliberation within the department itself. The self-study report does not have to be very long to accomplish this. In fact, shorter self-study reports should be better, with more time devoted to deliberation and discussion. If the Agency supplies the standard statistical data, this would be a help. As the meta-evaluation points out, much could be accomplished in the introductory

meetings between the department and the Agency. The Agency could help the department organize a process for conducting the study, ensuring that a broad range of people are included and that sessions are scheduled to engage in dialogue and deliberation. Perhaps the Agency could help more to organize the self-study. After the introductory meeting, a revised manual could help in the implementation of the self-study. The meta-evaluators have made specific recommendations for improving the manual.

But as important as we believe the self-studies to be, we still labor under some handicaps in commenting on them. Those of us who do not speak Swedish have still not seen what a subject report looks like, either the self-study or the review team's report. That must lead to important gaps in our understanding of the review system and what we can say about it. We believe we know how the self-study should be conducted, and make some suggestions toward that end above. But we need to know more about how the studies are actually conducted to comment on them more confidently. We understand the Agency's difficulties in getting good translations to us quickly; nevertheless, the work of this committee depends on that. Incidentally, it may be that we do not need translations to a publishable quality; even hasty ones that include some grammatical errors would be quite adequate to describe to us how matters are conducted, which is the important thing. Perhaps you do not need professional translators, when your Agency is full of people who speak our language as well or better than native speakers.

Audits and staff development in the institutions

The Swedish quality system and its three assessment functions

The institutional audit of the quality enhancement programs of universities and university colleges developed by the National Agency for Higher Education is still part of the Swedish evaluation model established by the Government in late 1999. According to the Government, the future focus of quality assurance will be on the assessment of programs and subjects. The third element of the Swedish model is the evaluation of education programs for accreditation.

While the energies of the Agency over the past two years have been focused on the creation of the new structures and procedures required for the assessment of every department and program in Sweden's universities and university colleges, the on-going audits are still a part of the Agency's work, and have a clear claim on our attention.

A culture of continuous improvement

Since 1995 all 36 institutions of higher education in Sweden have been audited, thus supporting the internal activities of quality improvement. The frame of reference for the audits is the 'learning university' and focus is on the governance and management of the institutions and, in particular, on processes safeguarding and improving quality.

Sweden has received much credit for introducing quality assurance and evaluation as regular features in the governance of higher education, and the audits were seen as an external force the main object of which being to mobilise the inner forces at the universities. A report by Massaro (1997, p.22) comparing Sweden with 20 other OECD countries said that: "Sweden has developed an enlightened and thorough approach, and I should imagine that it will have little difficulty in getting academics to accept the process." And further, "The National Agency for Higher Education has a dynamic concept of quality assessment and enhancement as having the best chance of achieving improvements, with an emphasis on supporting the institutions in their task of developing a culture of continuous improvement." Most important for the mobilising of the institution's own inner forces is the engagement of the staff in the quality work of the university. Staff development therefore is a crucial element of the Swedish audit program. Referring to Clark's power triangle, one could claim that the Agency has chosen a position in the triangle which is closer to the academics than to the state authorities or the market.

After the first round of audits was finished in 1998, a second round was conducted in the period 1998–2002. The first round demonstrated that there is room for development of quality enhancement processes at several institutions but that current ideas on quality enhancement are now becoming integrated into the work of the institutions. For the second round the institutions can choose either a full-scale model exactly the same as in the first round, or a modified model with no in-house visit by the audit team and an audit involving more (for example three) universities. The audit team bases the follow-up audit in the modified version on the institutional self-evaluation, selected documentation and interviews with three-four people (including the President and one student) from each university. For the audit team covering e.g. three universities, one member from the audit team of each university from the first round is chosen together with a representative from business or the public sector and a student. All audit members participate in all interviews. A common report with comparable elements is then written.

What has been learned?

The audit reports have been widely circulated throughout the institutions. Reactions from universities are mostly positive. Leadership and strategies have been at the focus of the audit teams' attention. Several reports stress the conflict between the collegial form of leadership and the need for more managerial structure imposed by demands for efficiency. Strategic, reasonably long-term programs stating clear operational goals for the quality enhancement ambitions are considered to be necessary tools for effective management. Identifying and co-operating with the stakeholders of higher education are necessary ingredients in university strategies and, in the opinion of the audit groups, the efforts and success of the institutions in this respect vary. One of the main criticisms of institutions' quality efforts concerns evaluation procedures and follow-up both as regards quality enhancement and other activities.

The impact of the Swedish audit program is reported in an ENQA Workshop Report "Institutional Evaluations in Europe" (Hämäläinen, Pehu-Voima, Wahlén, 2001), summarised as follows:

- Audits have affected internal quality processes positively to a fairly large extent.
- Similar developments may be discerned at different institutions.
- Quality work has not yet reached the critical mass needed for self-sustained growth in all institutions, which is the reason for the second cycle.
- An important aspect is the learning process for both institutions and, not least, the visiting teams.

From the second round, in which one of this advisory group members has participated in the modified model version, we learn that the three universities

involved all think that quality activities ought to be an integrated part of the general strategy planning and follow-up. They differ regarding how far this integration should be driven into all the units of the institution, depending on differences in structure, organisation and priorities. In some institutions we find a “total integration” of quality activities into the broad strategy plans of the unit; in such cases the university sees no need for a special quality program. In other institutions we see very detailed programs for quality assurance and quality development on all levels of the university as a part of its strategic planning, budgeting and follow-up. In the view of the audit team, at this stage of the learning process, it should be possible, even for a university with a completely integrated quality program, to describe its quality activities, relating them to its overall strategic plan.

Staff development in the institutions

For the development of a university as a learning organisation it is very important that the staff (both academic and non-academic) have the possibility to increase their qualifications according to the strategies and values of the university. Staff development is therefore part of the quality audit. In many universities focus has been on pedagogical training, and many very good programs have been launched. But human resource management is a much broader theme which deserves greater attention. We therefore recommend that the Agency make “staff development in the universities and university colleges” the subject of a special survey with guidelines for further development within the institutions.

In connection with the CRE Institutional Audit of the Copenhagen Business School in 1996, the auditors had this interpretation of the concept “the Learning University” based on the concept of the self-evaluative, adaptive organisation, with a culture characterised by:

- Experiment and risk taking
- Monitoring and evaluation
- Openness of relationships and encouragement of the admission of mistakes at all levels
- Problem resolution techniques built into normal relationships
- Absence of complacency
- Internal and external networking of a high order, and especially, the use of constructive strategic alliances within the university that enhance learning from successes and failure in a systematic manner.

The future

It is obvious that the Swedish universities and university colleges have learned from the quality audit program. Some universities have learned more than

others. Some of them may even claim that they meet the criteria of the concept of “excellence in higher education institutions” which, due to the summary of the guidelines for the second round of audits (“Fortsatt granskning ... Högskoleverkets rapportserie 1998:21 R, p.6), will continue to function as a frame of reference for institutions and audit teams. It describes the self-regulating institution in which everybody is involved in the development of quality processes and in which there is an overall, long-term strategy for quality enhancement. Other characteristics include focus on the student, gender equality and diversity, incisive leadership and an international perspective.

Developing a culture of continuous improvement in the institutions is an ongoing process, which in our opinion should be further stimulated by a dialogue between the Agency and the institutions with the necessary openness and transparency for satisfying the various stakeholders asking for accountability.

Strengthening and enhancing the institutional capacity for developing an internal quality culture was very much in focus at the 2nd EUA Conference. (The European University Association is a merger of the former CRE and the Confederation of EU University Presidents). Its first conference at Roskilde University, Denmark in April 2002 had the theme: “Autonomy and Quality: The Challenge for Institutions.” Quality was seen there as a tool for autonomy, and autonomy as a condition for quality. External trust in the quality of universities and their activities will be the only way to legitimise and to further increase institutional autonomy. The strengthening of the institutional quality culture was seen as necessary in order to balance the external functions of quality assurance. Responsiveness to external demands for accountability, transparency, credibility etc. is not opposed to self-regulation, but is an element of the institution’s responsibility to its stakeholders, ultimately safeguarding its autonomy.

Recommendations:

Based on the above observations we recommend that the Agency

- Do a ‘state of the art’ after the round of follow-up audits.
- Identify the ‘frontrunners’, the institutions with the ‘best practice’ within the different areas of the audit.
- With the assistance of staff from the Agency set up working-groups which bring together people from ‘best practice’ institutions and institutions which still have to learn, with the aim of transfer of ‘best practice’ from one institution to another, taking into account the differences of learning environments.
- Report on these learning experiences and make those reports public.

The focus of the audits and the different follow-up activities is different from the subject and program evaluations. The subject and program evaluations

only look into a limited part of all the activities of a university and have a focus on control, whereas the audits look at the university as a whole and have a much greater emphasis on improvement. However, the two instruments can get along very well side-by-side, as they have been doing so far. They are both strong instruments for further enhancement of the internal quality culture in Swedish universities and university colleges and their development as learning organisations.

Managing tensions: comparability/ diversity and departments/disciplines

One of the most striking and impressive characteristics of the Swedish model of subject review is the range of tensions in objectives and values that it acknowledges and accommodates. Some, such as that between control and development, are familiar and common to most systems of quality assurance. Others are less so. They arise from the challenge of developing a quality assurance system that meets the needs of multiple stakeholders in a context where concepts of knowledge, learning, teaching and quality itself are increasingly contestable. In such a context, paradoxically, there is a greater need for clarity and determinacy on the part of evaluators.

Here we briefly consider two sets of tension. The first is triangular: between providing future students and other stakeholders with clear and accessible information on which they can base critical choices, recognising the multi-dimensional nature of quality and encouraging diversity in higher education. The system is, in consequence, seeking to incorporate comparability of the information it yields at the same time as encouraging subject providers to identify the distinctive characteristics of their programs and actual and potential users to embrace the complexity of qualitative judgements.

The Agency has rightly resisted any kind of simplistic ranking approach to evaluation. The frameworks for comparability are nevertheless strong, combining the requirements of the law with a clear structure for the self-study reports, which entails, amongst other things, the supply by subject providers of some basic quantitative data. They also demonstrate the variety of generic dimensions and values on which judgements about the quality of education are commonly based.

At the same time, the Agency recognises the diversity of student populations, of institutional and departmental structures and of educational and epistemic cultures by instituting a process of dialogue and negotiation with each subject provider about the precise form and scope of the review. It is thus possible for reviews to accommodate particular characteristics and aims.

As yet, the area of least certainty is how and how far the review teams develop, articulate and apply subject-specific criteria. Since the weight of the advisory committee's concern has been with the need to guard against the identification of over-rigid criteria that might promote responses of compliance and conformity among providers, we would regard this as probably a strength rather than a weakness of the system at this stage. External pressures upon evaluative systems as they bed down are more often towards elaboration than simplification.

The second set of tensions are, broadly, between comparatively stable administrative structures – departments and professional programs – and the

changing, in some cases rapidly changing, disciplines which shape teaching and research. In common with other national systems of subject review, the Swedish system is organised round departments and professional programs, some well-established, other new or emergent, around which most universities are still organised, and most academics have built their identities. These structures remain a strong source of identity despite the fact that they may not now represent the cognitive assumptions within which many academics do their work or many students pursue their education. This is clearer in some areas in the sciences than in humanistic subjects and the social sciences, though disciplinary boundaries in the latter are also increasingly blurred and permeable. One of the findings by Karlsson *et al.* in their meta-evaluation of the Swedish subject review system (2002) is that some subject providers are working within a different map of knowledge from that of the Agency. It may also be that an evaluation organised round departments is not capable of producing judgements about the quality of whole educational experience of many or even most students, as distinct from the quality of the provision contributing to it.

Although this is an issue that caused us to raise some questions in our last report, at present there are advantages to this kind of structure for the reviews. Without it, the aims of comparability would almost certainly have to be abandoned; that may be necessary in the future, but perhaps not yet. More seriously, despite the growing challenges to disciplines and departments, we still do not have a very clear picture of the extent to which the importance of the department has, in fact, declined or of the purposes that it continues to serve in student learning or in the production of knowledge in different fields. That certainly varies among disciplines, a fact that at least in some subjects undermines the possibility of comparability between departments.

The Agency's commitment to flexibility and responsiveness, within the broad disciplinary structure that it has set up, has the potential to contribute to a better understanding of the epistemic maps currently in use in higher education and the costs and benefits to which they give rise. It can encourage subject providers to show clearly how far they are modifying or expanding disciplinary frameworks, and help provide a more soundly based account of practices. In this way, it may point the way towards a coherent alternative organising principle for subject reviews, one that at present does not exist.

Evaluation in the stakeholder society and changing institutional cultures

Of the many interpretational perspectives to emerge recently from analysing the interplay between higher education, society and the economy, the concept of higher education as a 'stakeholding activity' is one. It is a powerful political metaphor which, is not always accepted with the same alacrity in mainland Europe as it enjoys in the United States and Britain. Nevertheless, it provides

a useful summation of some of the more outstanding changes which ‘liberalising’ the economy on the one hand and the development of what ‘new public management’ on the other have introduced into the ‘public life’ and thus into the institutional culture of higher education: the press towards privatisation, the reinterpretation of the university as a ‘service university’, the rise of academic entrepreneurship and the introduction of new criteria for ascertaining institutional performance and output. To this, Sweden is no exception.

The concept of stakeholding tends often to be equated with the notion of ‘getting value for money’ on the understanding that the better the value the more external stakeholder interests will support the goals, priorities and purpose that constituencies internal to the institution have developed, agreed upon and negotiated as part of the services they provide the community, whether local or national. Thus the idea of stakeholders to whom accounts and evaluation of performance are rendered lies at the heart of the rise of the Evaluative State in Western Europe.

Many national models of institutional evaluation tend to confound institutional performance, productivity and output – what has been achieved – with what information is necessary for students to make considered choice between different institutions or programs. An alternative to governmental guidance of student choice through the publication of institutional evaluations is to leave the processing and presentation of ‘consumer choice’ to commercial undertakings – that is, in effect, ‘outsourcing’ the data, its interpretation, its presentation – and thus leaving to others to determine the use to which the information is subsequently put.

As we had cause to note last year in our review, the Swedish model as it was then developing and which is confirmed further by our exchanges within the National Agency for Higher Education this year, is clearly evolving along different lines. These lines turn around two basic principles. First, the reassertion of that feature which students of comparative higher education policy have long identified as a almost uniquely Swedish, namely a long term perspective which is also future oriented. Second, that higher education is and remains a public service, and that the purpose of evaluation is not confined solely to providing ‘value for money’. Evaluation has as its essential objective the improvement of the services which higher education provides the public. Of these, ‘value for money’ is an element, but is not necessarily an appropriate measure of the improvement or success of higher education in all respects. The notion of ‘value’ in that concept is a constricted conception of the purposes or outcomes of higher education, confined to short-term easily measurable outcomes, neglectful of long term outcomes that do not lend themselves to easy measurement. It is clear to us that the Swedish model by its actions understands this.

During our review of its work, we were particularly impressed by the very considerable effort invested by the Agency to ensure that the type of information generated by the review process in general was both sensitive to the need

to build up confidence amongst those evaluated and also to provide information relevant, up to date and in a form 'friendly to users' – very particularly in the information brochures which derived from these exercises and which were circulated amongst students. We were, in this connection, impressed by the carefully thought-out general strategy of widespread dissemination.

Clearly, within the current setting in Sweden, we find ourselves in the presence of a different construction and interpretation of what is often alluded to as an 'evaluative culture'. The difference is to be seen not just in the balance between institutional audit on the one hand, and the opportunities for comment and discussion provided by the review of individual departments and programs, on the other. It also resides in the explicit commitment to 'externalising' the results of the review process with the purpose of improving the level of knowledge and discrimination among external stakeholders.

In other words, the Swedish variation of 'evaluation culture' is not confined, as it tends very often to be elsewhere, to those who are judged and those who 'sit in judgement'. In Sweden the current review exercise is not confined to the agencies mandated to carry out this function and the 'expert society' of academia – with the option that those outside this relatively closed cycle of accountability may occasionally inform themselves. On the contrary, the Swedish variation of 'evaluative culture' contains a third facet specifically anchored into the review process from the start in the persons of student representatives – graduate as well as undergraduate – with further special sensitivity to the interests of the press who stand in for the larger society.

Put crudely, evaluation culture in Sweden, technically sophisticated and sensitive as it is, also contains a democratic purposiveness which ought, in principle at least, to result in extending our current definitions of 'evaluative culture' beyond the institutional frame which surrounds it elsewhere. If, for sake of argument, we were to take what we conceive as the Swedish model as a bench-mark, it is not out of place to point out that other systems, and very often those which from a purely chronological standpoint, once figured amongst the pioneers in evaluation – France, the Netherlands and Britain – now take on a somewhat curtailed appearance in the extent to which they remain primarily focussed on the 'inner aspects' of evaluation culture, leaving to others the task of interpreting the results – that is, of extending that culture into the broader society.

Yet, precisely because part of the mission of the Agency engages it in the process of opening up access to the type of information flowing from program evaluation, so those tensions, visible elsewhere between reviewers and the reviewed, are especially delicate. Indeed, they are arguably more so given the imperative to provide relevant, timely and grounded information to stakeholders. The price of imposing an evaluation regime on institutions of higher education is often very high indeed. With it comes the risk of creating a perverse version of a culture of self-improvement, that is, a culture of formal

compliance and secret dissent, and resistance to any efforts at change arising either inside or outside the department or institution.

The Agency, in our view, is well aware that the way universities and university colleges view their role is of paramount importance in determining the nature of that relationship and with it, the successful establishment of the Swedish style of evaluation. In the fundamental task of acquiring a grounded legitimacy in the eyes of the academic estate, has walked – and continues to walk – ‘exceeding delicately’. It is, of course, aided in this by one of the basic characteristics of Swedish political culture, which turns around prior negotiation and consensus building.

This latter aspect is of no small advantage. And hopefully public commitment to such a ‘policy style’ will continue to be a matter on which both academia and the national oversight body may count. That said, however, a number of factors may well place this style of reaching accommodation under considerable strain.

The first of these is the notion of stakeholder society itself and the extent to which the ownership of knowledge is correspondingly adjusted either to maintain the notion of knowledge being the traditional domain of ‘experts’ – of those who ‘profess it’ – or whether, on the contrary, ownership of knowledge should be construed as residing in ‘interest groups’.

Whilst such a re-definition is not inevitable, it does appear to be implicit in the formal composition of the review groups themselves and very particularly so when one moves on from evaluating discipline-based departments to those with an inter- or trans-disciplinary profile. In those fields of study, ownership of knowledge construed in terms of ‘interests’ may well be more in keeping with the rapidly shifting boundaries of knowledge. But, by the same token, the ownership of knowledge which breaks outside traditional disciplinary boundaries almost certainly entails more protracted negotiation over what interests ought to be involved, as well as how and what should be evaluated. When the map of knowledge is changing rapidly, it is not just a problem for the evaluation of ‘quality’. It is even more a problem to define what groups in society have a right to have an interest in what is being studied and taught in those departments and programs. Just who are the stakeholders when the subject is in flux?

This cluster of problems arises precisely from the speed at which some subject areas are evolving. Certainly, current procedures, and especially those involving new subject areas, require that academic staff involved at institutional level reach consensus on what the new domain entails. And such agreement must also gain the endorsement of the remaining members in the review team. It remains unclear to us, however, what degree of subsequent change in a field is required that would justify re-negotiating that consensus, still less the operational dimensions that would trigger such re-negotiations. If, as is often claimed, the pace of change and development – above all in the science

and technology fields and most assuredly at their interstices – is accelerating, anticipating and thus providing for such contingencies merits further attention. We have the sense that the difficulties posed by these problems have led the Agency to set them aside for later consideration, giving priority to the central task of creating the infrastructure and procedures for the current review exercise.

Finally, there remains the ‘temptation of the facile comparison’, all too often evident in other systems of higher education with their recourse to institutional rank ordering. Evaluation agencies come under enormous pressure from stakeholder society in general and from ‘final beneficiaries’ most especially, to furnish comparisons on nationally standardised criteria a pressure all the greater for the setting up of inter-agency network bodies at a supra-national level in the wake of the Bologna Declaration of June 1999. In that Declaration evaluation and quality assurance are well to the fore.

The Agency has resolutely set its face against such temptation and, in our opinion, insists rightly and vigorously in mapping the variety available in Swedish higher education rather than yielding to siren calls to demonstrate conformity and homogeneity. We applaud the refusal to assign evaluative grades whilst we also recognise that the tensions this creates between different services within the Agency itself are probably the inevitable price of such laudable resolution.

In the long run, the major task on which the Agency is engaged with the Swedish version of stakeholder society is basically paedagogic – that is, to show why and how evaluation of variety is better suited to the evolving needs of Swedish society and thus functionally more useful than earlier models which emphasised uniformity and similarity. Nor is this task limited to Sweden alone. The weight placed upon informing the student estate, the importance attached to the ethos of higher education as a public service, are themselves alternatives that merit attention outside Sweden, if only to prevent bodies of parallel purpose elsewhere in Europe from succumbing to the rigor mortis of those earlier evaluatory modes they once pioneered.

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