

2.3.3. Every university should reflect the population – a political goal for widening participation in Sweden

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The ideology and history of WP in Sweden

Widening participation in higher education has been a political goal for a very long time in Sweden. Policies were based on the following key elements:

- Liberal entrance requirements (only necessary qualifications should be required)
- Recognising informal learning and non-academic qualifications
- Equality of treatment (strict rules and centralised admission procedures)
- Increasing geographical accessibility (by setting up new regional universities)
- Expanding intake capacity to both pre-HE and HE
- Upgrading of non-university HE (vocation-oriented tertiary education)
- Giving adult students who have not benefited from earlier educational reforms a “second chance”.

Several of these elements relating to admission and admission reforms have been an important and controversial part of higher education policy for several decades. It was used as a tool for breaking class privilege and to even out the prevailing differences in social recruitment to HE. Furthermore, entry regulations to HE have a major impact on education at lower levels and on adult education, where students’ life chances and decisions on further studies are formed. So, the history of WP in Sweden follows the same line as the gradual reform of admission regulations and procedures.

During the last 40 years, at least six government commissions have dealt exclusively with such problems and frequent changes in admission rules have been decided at the political level. However, they were all within the same centralised model.

An important feature of Swedish higher education is its homogeneity, uniformity and centralisation. Accordingly, the Swedish policy for WP has been to integrate the so-called new groups of students on equal terms with traditional students. This is in accordance with the general principles of mainstreaming and avoidance of selective measures in Swedish welfare policies. Students suffering from disabilities are, in fact, the only ones receiving special treatment or extra funding in the Swedish HE system. In contrast, actions taken for remedial adult education outside the HE system have been more selective.

At the start, widened access for adult students was based on the notion that experience and knowledge issuing from working life and non-formal education were, in some respects, *equivalent* to formal schooling qualifications, although it was recognised that qualifications of adult students were *different* from those of young students. “Different but equal” was a main point of departure for the reforms of the 1960s and bridging measures were part of the reforms. But, when the emphasis shifted to more egalitarian motives, the demand for individual assessment of qualifications was dropped, as were compensatory measures like counselling, introductory courses etc. The financial student support scheme

was also gradually made more uniform for all students, regardless of parental income, family situation, children etc. With the last reform in 2001, aiming at a “more uniform and less complicated scheme”, HE students were included in the general welfare system, grants were considered as pensionable income and students were directed to social security for child and housing allowances.

The possibility to work part time during study periods was somewhat enlarged but the limit for such additional income has remained.

When Sweden, in 1977, integrated all HE at the undergraduate level into one coordinated system of colleges and universities it was not only a continuation of the comprehensive school reforms of earlier decades but yet another step towards uniformity.

An important aim of the reform was to promote social equity by broadening access to HE, especially among underprivileged groups and regions, by upgrading non-university institutions, and by the establishment of regional HEIs. Higher education was expanded throughout the country in order to increase access and accessibility. The new universities were supposed to play a crucial role in reducing regional discrepancies in participation.

Insofar as they have contributed to general expansion they have been part of the achievements of WP, but otherwise opinions differ as to what extent they have really promoted equality of educational opportunity.

Ever since this reform the Swedish HE system applies a unique combination of restricted admission and mass higher education. There are restrictions on intake to most programmes and a large number of applicants are rejected at each round of admission. In legal terms the whole HE sector is subject to *numerus clausus* by intake or economic restrictions set by the government. General eligibility for higher education does not, like in many other European countries, give access to university training, just the right to participate in the competition for entry. Students who want to enter highly competitive programmes stay on in school (or adult education institutions) in order to maximise their grades, which lead to lottery and delayed entry for some students. The policy debate on admission is therefore more on selection among high achievers than on admission of students with non-formal qualifications.

Enrolment patterns

Social class

Class-related educational inequalities decreased in Sweden from 1930 to 1970 but remained fairly stable from the early 1970s up to the early 1990s despite several reforms aimed at equal access to higher education. The pattern of inequality was very much the same in Sweden as in other industrial nations, even if the degree of inequality was somewhat lower. The expansion of the HE sector in the 1990s and early 2000s has, finally, broadened recruitment in terms of social background. The proportion of new entrants from working class backgrounds has gone up from 18% in 1993/94 to 24% in 2003/04, whereas students from higher social classes have decreased their share from 33 to 28%. The distribution according to social class in the population at large has been stable in the meantime, which indicates a levelling of social inequalities in recruitment to higher education over that period. Still, the social background has a considerable impact on both students’ choice of study and the educational outcome. The differences in students’ social background are bigger between programmes than between institutions.

Additionally, there are no significant differences in success rates in Sweden between students from different social backgrounds, if you consider the differences in fields of study. Inequalities are rooted far back in the school system.

The social discrepancies stand out more clearly when choice of study is taken into account; middle class students more often study in highly competitive programmes leading to high status jobs whereas young people from lower social classes often enrol in shorter vocationally oriented programmes.

In some of the more prestigious programmes, where competition for entry is high, there has been only a marginal increase in working class participation or no increase at all.

Lifelong learning

Substantial numbers of older adults are participating in tertiary education beyond the usual study period in Sweden. This has been the case ever since the 1970s and, until recently Government policy has been to reinforce this development in different ways.

Gender

Gender inequality is primarily a disadvantage to male, not female, students – at least reflected in the overall figures. Female students make up more than 60% of the total enrolments in Sweden and female participation is going up year on year.

Ethnicity

The link between ethnic background and transfer to higher education is complex: the cultural differences are added to the general social dimension. In the academic year 2003/04 about 17% of those admitted to higher education (exchange students not included) had a foreign background, i.e. were born abroad or had parents born abroad. This is about the same share as in the population at large, which indicates that there are no big differences in the overall transfer rate to HE between people with Swedish background and those of foreign descent. Due to social and cultural factors there are, however, big differences between *nationalities*.

Disabilities

The number of students in need of special support due to disabilities has increased in recent years, in particular students with dyslexia. In the year 2004 a total amount of SEK 67 million was spent on support to students with disabilities and 3 500 students got help from sign interpreters. All HEIs are obliged to set aside 0.3 per cent of their basic funding for this kind of special support and this sum has increased fourfold in the last eight years.

Recent Government reforms and initiatives

The Government bill *An Open Higher Education System*, which was put forward in 2001, contains an outline of the Swedish policy for WP and is still valid, although the Government has shifted from left-wing to right-wing. The following is summary of the main part in this strategy:

Action plans for widening participation

Every HEI was obliged by law to work out a local plan of action for their student recruitment activities and to develop more consistent and valid indicators of progress in this area.

Bridging/preparatory courses and “college programmes”

An introductory year to higher education, successfully tried in science, has been introduced also in other subject areas. These preparatory courses are open to students lacking the formal qualifications to enter higher education studies and should be initiated primarily in areas where the number of qualified applicants is too low.

Accreditation of prior/experiential learning

The responsibility of HEIs to validate the applicant’s prior learning to see if it matches the admission requirements has been improved –but not at the expense of the lowering of standards. However, up to now this opening up of new routes to higher education has had a rather marginal effect on student recruitment.

Alternative rules of selection

The admission rules have been made somewhat more flexible by the introduction of a “free quota”, which means that HEIs can apply their own rules of selection to 33% of their intake capacity - a remarkable break with the principle of uniformity in admission. However, only a small number of students have been enrolled on the basis of alternative rules.

Widening participation measures at Uppsala University

Widening participation at Uppsala University is a highly complex issue. Groups that are strikingly underrepresented in some areas are well represented in others. The group of students from different ethnic backgrounds, taken as a whole, is on a par with society in general. In some areas of education, such as pharmacy, the group is seemingly overrepresented. Within this group, however, there is highly uneven representation between the different ethnic groups, implying that some ethnic groups are markedly underrepresented. Looking at gender, female students are generally overrepresented, but in some areas they are underrepresented.

At Uppsala University, the work for widening participation includes a wide range of measures, where only a minor part is aimed directly at the recruiting of students from underrepresented groups. From the very beginning of our work aiming at widening participation the overarching thought has been that it is necessary not only to recruit a larger proportion of students from underrepresented groups. It is just as important that, at their arrival at the university, measures are taken to make the new students feel welcome and fully included in their new environment. Furthermore, it can be assumed that many of the students are unaccustomed to studying, and that, to some, language may cause a problem. Hence, in order to reduce the early drop-out rate, during their first period at the university the new students also have to be offered adequate support.

Below we list and comment upon some of the main actions Uppsala University, through the years 2003-2009, has been taking. Finally a brief assessment of the widening participation measures and their achievements is given.

Recruiting measures

Student fairs and visiting work at upper secondary schools

Uppsala University participates in some 8 to 10 larger student fairs each year. In addition to this, on invitation a vast number of visits to upper secondary schools are carried out. In both activities, effort is put into engaging active university students from underrepresented groups. Study counsellors and programme coordinators suggest active students to engage in the activities. Student ambassadors involved in the diversity project ESMeralda, run by the student union, Uppsala University and Uppsala municipality, are especially invited and encouraged to participate as student representatives at the fairs and in the school visits.

In engaging students in this activity consideration is also given to their branch of education, so that, for instance, female students are engaged as representatives for areas where they are underrepresented, etc.

Invitation of upper secondary schools to visit Uppsala University

Every year secondary school students in the region around Uppsala are invited to visit Uppsala University. The visiting students chose from a range of information activities, at different parts of the university, covering different fields of education.

In the invitations to these events it is made sure that also schools with education not primarily designed for higher education preparation are included. Uppsala University covers the costs for buses from the schools to the different campus areas of the university to enable schools and individuals to participate freely.

The activity is clearly appreciated by the participating students. To what extent it actually contributes to widening participation, though, is not clear. One can easily imagine that, for instance, students from a non-academic background and from schools with low transition to higher education, will primarily visit activities related to exactly the kind of education that normally attract this group.

Visiting activities at schools with low transition to higher education

During the period 2006-2008, a project implying regular visits to one upper secondary school in Uppsala, singled out for its students' low transition to higher education, was launched. One of the university study- and career counsellors participated in information meetings for the school staff. Together with a student from the aforementioned diversity project, the study- and career counsellor also visited classes and groups of students, to give information about university studies and student life.

The visits were well received by the students. The study- and career counsellor involved in the project concluded that the participation of a student representative – a student ambassador – did indeed attract the interest of many of the school students. Hence, in a possible continuation of the project, more time and resources should be spent on the student ambassador's involvement.

This remark is interesting, as from the very beginning of our work for widening participation, it has been our conviction that probably the most efficient recruiting measure that can be taken, involves the

meeting of prospective students from underrepresented groups with active students with similar backgrounds, thus presenting role models for the targeted group.

Reception measures

Welcome calls

Just before the start of the semester, the newly admitted students get a call from active students from the same course that they are admitted to. The call from the active students offers the new students a first contact with Uppsala University, and gives the newcomer the chance to ask questions about the course and the university and also to discuss practical things such as how to arrange accommodation, where to find the library, where to find course texts at the best price, etc. Most of the newcomers are reached by the welcome callers, and the calls are highly appreciated.

Introduction of new students

Most departments have long had well-established activities for introducing new students. Together with the student union and the student health care, Uppsala University has produced a booklet with tips on how activities can be organised in order not to exclude or discriminate individual students. Activities must be adapted to students with different cultural and religious backgrounds with different customs and regulations, including food and drink. Activities should also be such that disabled students are not excluded.

Retention measures

Support services and information

At Uppsala University a range of supporting services are available for students. Some services are for students from certain departments or faculties only, while other are open to all students.

The Language Workshop is open to all students at Uppsala University who want help with their oral or written presentations.

The students can get free support in writing their essays and preparing presentations, whether in Swedish or in English. The language workshop is available for all students, but as students from families with no academic tradition, or with a different ethnic background, may often find academic writing hard to acquire, the Language Workshop is seen as an important support service for students from underrepresented groups.

It is important not only that there is support available, but also that the students are aware that it is there. To ensure that as many students as possible are informed of the support services offered, all course and programme information on the web and in print should include this information.

Relevance of programmes for labour market

Students with no academic tradition in their family seem to prefer full programmes to single subject courses. They also tend to apply to programmes with an obvious connection to the labour market. In academic fields where education traditionally has been offered in the form of single subject courses,

programmes have now been created. The programmes also include courses with a practical orientation towards working life. In some cases an internship is optional. Information about the programmes includes hints about what part of the labour market the education in question is aiming at.

What has been achieved, and what's in the future?

It is difficult, not to say impossible, to determine which of the measures taken have been an efficient means to widening participation. Expecting that any single activity should have such any measurable effect would be rather naïve. From statistics we can only establish that, in quantitative terms, not much has been achieved. But on the other hand, we cannot know what rates uneven representation might have reached if all these activities had not been carried out.

The mechanisms working against widening participation are well-rooted in society and affect children long before the university has any way of reaching them. Thus, the work for widening participation must be seen as long term, and neither any single activity nor the activities taken together, can be expected to yield any immediate result. Since the ratification of our first policy for widening participation 2003 however, what has definitely been achieved is – throughout the whole of the university organisation – an increase in awareness of the need for widening participation together with a consolidation of efforts. And this achievement in turn gives ground at least for a somewhat guarded optimism.

The above mentioned activities are well established and will be continued. In addition to this, the university policy for widening participation 2009-2012 states that a series of measures are to be taken, such as:

- Routines for assessment of real competence will be developed
- Departments are encouraged to develop standards for alternative selection, with a widening participation perspective
- Further strengthening of relevance and connection to the labour market throughout the programmes
- Further information about the wide range of support services available to students
- Further information about support services for disabled students
- Facilitating new students' adaption to the university and life as a university student
- Adapting teaching and examination methods to the diversity situation

Reference

Bridging the Gap: widening participation in Sweden and England. Report by Maria Johansson, Lillemor Kim, John Storan and Sverker Sörlin. Publisher: SISTER (Swedish Institute for Studies in Education and Research), 2005. ISBN 1-874210-29.2.