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Evaluation of didactics, education and teacher education programs – reflections on the new system for quality assurance

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The contemporary Swedish system for quality assurance of higher education has been strongly criticized. The main critique has been that it only focuses on a measurement of the results and that it has been difficult to use in the development of higher education. The government's answer to this critique has been that the question on development of education – and hence the development of its prerequisites and processes – is owned by the universities themselves. However, from 2016 and on the system will be changed. A suggestion for how this will be designed and organized will be presented in December 2014. In this presentation, I will discuss and compare the contemporary system with the suggestion for a new one. The presentation will start in a difference between two visions often formulated in the discussion about quality assurance systems. On the one hand, some stress that the research should be assessed and discussed between colleagues. On the other hand, there are those who demand that quality must be measured by "objective" measures. The presentation will focus especially on the evaluation of Didactics, Education and Teacher Education.

Two different visions are pronounced and often put against each other in discussions about evaluation of the quality of higher education. On the one hand, some people stress that education should be assessed by colleagues with the main aim to enhance the quality of the practices. On the other hand others stress that the quality should be measured by "objective" methods and mainly focus on the results of the programs.²

As an example of how this difference can be expressed I want to highlight the discussion about the Swedish system for quality assurance of higher education. In the following, I will shortly compare and discuss the contemporary systems with the suggestion for a new one. In so doing, I will illustrate the discussion with the debate that has followed in the Swedish newspaper Svenska Dagbladet (SvD) after that professor Harriet Wallberg on April 8 2014 was assigned by the government to work out a proposal for a new system for quality assurance.

The Swedish Higher Education Authority is responsible for national evaluations of higher education. For the last six years these evaluations have focused on the results of education and each program has been graded on a three level scale.³ The system used has been strongly criticized for its one-sided focus on results and not on the educational programs' preconditions and processes (cf. SvD 13/4

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² It should also be noted that it is possible to find the same two visions when it comes to the discussion about evaluation of research. For example, the Swedish Research Council has been commissioned by the government to develop a proposal for assessment of research to can be used when allocating research funds (U2013/1700/F). In its assignment, it is clear that the work must take into account the discussion on the assessment and measurement: "Peer review may also take into account a broader concept of quality than mere for example, citations and external funding for research. It may for example include assessments of various forms of utilization of research-based knowledge" (my translation). Further, from 2015 and on, UKÄ will also make quality assessment at national level of graduate studies. Exactly how it will be designed is not decided yet.

³ National evaluations of educational programs have been conducted since the 1990s and can be seen as a central part of the development of New Public Management that have characterized the Swedish education system for the last decades (Askling 2007).

2014). The main critique has been that it only focuses on a measurement of the results and that it has been difficult to use the evaluations in the development of higher education (cf. SvD 13/4 2014). The main empirical material used in the evaluation has been bachelor and master theses and it has been assumed that the quality of those also says something about the quality of the whole program. However, this may not be true, especially not in vocational programs (as for example the teacher education programs) and in transdisciplinary programs (cf. SvD, 6/12 2014).

The former government's answer to the critique has been that the issue on development of education – and hence the development of its prerequisites and processes – is owned by the universities themselves. However, as a result of the massive critique and because the one sided focus on results have led to a situation where the Swedish system is not accredited by ENQA anymore, the system will be changed.⁴ A proposal for how this system will be designed and organized was presented by Wallberg in December 2014. In her report she stresses that the universities should get the responsibility to evaluate their own educational programs, but also that the system should “/.../support the enhancement of quality and provide universities with incentives and guidance for how to develop their programs” (my translation).⁵

In their article in SvD, Tobias Hägerland och Alexander Maurits reacts on the proposal and stress that evaluation – or rather measurement of quality – should be done on the national level and not something to be handled by the universities themselves. They rather want to see a centralized system which, according to them, would make it possible to get objective measurements and make it possible to compare and rank the universities.

The article by Hägerland and Maurits was probably followed by discussions at the universities and it resulted in two responding articles in the same newspaper. In the first article, Johan Alvfors, chair of the Swedish National Union of Students, says that students are not interested in (in contrast to what Hägerland and Maurits stress) in rankings lists of the universities in Sweden. Instead, he calls for evaluations that can be used in order to enhance all higher education (SvD 5/12 2014).

In her article on the following day, Harriet Wallberg elaborates a bit on her, not yet publishes proposal, and highlights the need of giving the universities the responsibility – within clear borders with peer review of the programs and so on – to evaluate their own education. She also suggests a more flexible evaluation system aiming at enhancement of quality and not just measurement of the results (SvD 6/12 2014).

In sum, the discussion of the system has stressed either the value of summative assessments with measurements and grading or the value of formative assessment. This is obvious in my short description of the debate on the responsibility for evaluation of higher education in Sweden. The two positions in the debate are, as I understand it, built on the two visions outlined in this think piece.

⁴ ENQA stands for European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. For more information, see <http://www.enqa.eu/>.

⁵ We do not yet have access to the written report, but Wallberg has presented her preliminary proposal and she has written about it in SvD. For a preliminary version of her proposal, see <http://uka.se/download/18.6cd9c6e9149126b701528a3d/1414662216085/presentation-preliminart-forslag-nytt-utvsystem-28okt.pdf>

Both visions for quality assurance, as well as the practices developed on the basis of them, must of course be clear and understandable. When the quality is assessed by peers it should be based on clearly formulated criteria. When it comes to measuring quality other criteria should be used.

The difference between measurement and collegial assessment is also about what kind of results you can get and what it can do. The assessment practices are often in the form of formative assessments (think for example of the peer review of research articles) where it is important not only to summarize the merits, virtues and defects but also to recommend changes. In the measurement practice the summative results are often presented in charts and figures, in tables and rankings.

It is possible to argue back and forth about the pros and cons of the different systems. Assessment performed by colleagues includes assessing the qualitative contribution that education makes. It could be to assess the contribution to the scientific field, to the society and so on.⁶ A limitation of this type of assessment is that it is difficult to use them to support decisions on what to prioritize. This is where the vision of measurement comes in. In research, as in education, priorities must be made and it may be easier to do them if you have access to “objective” measurements.⁷ However, it is not obvious that the amount of money, publications, citations or teaching hours is contributing to science and teaching. It is for example possible that someone is often quoted because she or he has written something really stupid which many others need to publish critical texts about (Larsson 2009).

It should also be noted that the dividing line is not always so clear between the two different practices. The score in a measurement is also the result of an assessment process that includes a work by colleagues, reading the theses and grading the programs. My point in making the distinction between measurement and collegial assessment is rather that the discussion now seems to focus on these two extremes.

As I see it, it is important that university teachers and researchers actively participate in this discussion.⁸ Teachers and researchers in the field concerned with the obvious. The question is how we can/should relate to visions and criteria for assessing the quality and how the results of measurements and collegial assessments can be used in the planning of our practices.

The discussion about evaluation systems often seem to be about these two visions. Probably both are needed. The problem arises, as I see it, when trying to articulate and apply universal methods to evaluate the simply measurable. The danger is that we fail to assess and discuss what is important.

⁶ In research, peer-review systems appears to work well and it has strong legitimacy among scientists. But of course, it implies that the criteria for assessment are clear, accepted and used (see, eg Englund 2013).

⁷ The bibliometric measurement of research in the humanities, social sciences and education science areas often use the so-called Norwegian model, which basically means that different publications get different amounts of points (Nordgren 2012, p 570). In comparison with the model that is most common in bibliometric studies (based on publications in ISI - Web of Knowledge) it includes not only journal articles but also monographs and anthologies. It uses two levels, where publications at level 2 ranks above publications at level 1. There is also a level 0 for publications that are not included in the Norwegian list. This level may involve, for example reports, popular science texts and teaching materials.

⁸ Interestingly, when it comes to the discussion of research evaluation, which concerns most research in the field of educational sciences in Sweden, not much has been written about it in “our” magazines. I have searched for relevant articles of *Pedagogisk forskning i Sverige*, Vol 10 (2005) - 19 (2014), and in the *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* and in *Nordic Studies in Education* with the keywords bibliometrics OR higher education OR Assessment.

Different ways of measuring quality is probably here to stay. The question is how we can use the results of these measurements in order to strengthen our practices.

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