Introduction

This article outlines the Swedish national quality assurance system of higher education institutions, placing it in a historical and international context. Currently, a new system is under construction as a result of heavy criticism of the system applied since 2011. What the new system will precisely confer is too early to tell. Its ambition is to align with the principles (European Standards and Guidelines; ESG 2015) that have been developed within the frame of the Bologna Process.
The Swedish Higher Education System

Brief Historical Background

Two universities compete about the title of being the first university in Sweden; Lund University in the south of Sweden, and Uppsala University just north of Stockholm, capital of Sweden. However, both have their roots in the mid to late 15th century and both are highly prestigious today. The foundation of the modern Swedish university system was laid during the 19th century at Uppsala University, inspired by the Humboldt tradition from Germany. Focus of this tradition was that education should be based on research and that the universities should belong to the state but as autonomous bodies primarily dominated and ruled by their professors. This tradition is somewhat different from the systems that were developed in Great Britain and France at the same time, but the need for university-educated people was the same in all these countries; the states’ growing need for well-educated civil servants (Rothblatt 1997; Gougoulakis 2005).

In 1852, the title ‘university chancellor’ was introduced. The university chancellor was a nationally appointed person who had the responsibility for both Uppsala and Lund universities; at that moment the only universities in Sweden. By his side, he had a pro chancellor and a rector at each of the two universities (Frängsmyr 2005). The title is still used, but now for the person who is heading the national quality assurance agency, currently, the Swedish Authority for Higher Education (UKÄ). Both the role and the mandate differ from the original though; the position is not any longer above, but on the same level as the university rectors (vice chancellors), in relation to the government.

Originally, the power of the professors was very strong, although all professors were appointed by the Swedish king, and later by the government. This was the case all the way until the 1990s, when universities were allowed to appoint their own professors. The recruitment of professors today can be done basically in two ways; announcing a professorship where persons seek the position in open competition with others, or by simply promoting a person from the title of docent (associate professor) to professor, based on the criteria similar to those used in the former case; all regulated in the Higher Education Ordinance (Högskoleförordning 1993: 100). The formal demands concern the individual’s qualifications with regards to research, teaching and administration. Research background, basically in terms of publications, is still the dominating factor although teaching competences are given more and more weight in the evaluation due to a growing insight that quality in teaching is not necessarily connected to excellence in research.
Endnotes

1 In this article, we make the distinction between intended learning outcomes and achieved learning outcomes, where the first refers to the written statements in course descriptions, syllabi and curricula, and the latter refers to the actual study results produced by the students.

2 HSV was closed down at the turn of 2012/13 and replaced by the two new agencies; the Swedish Higher Education Authority (Universitetskanslerämbetet; UKÄ, http://english.uka.se/) and the Swedish Council for Higher Education (Universitets-och högskolerådet; UHR, https://www.uhr.se/en/start/).

3 In practice, this result focus, decided by the parliament, was treated very inconsistently by the external evaluation committee (EEC). In some cases, the EECs evaluated the degree projects as prescribed, but in others, a number of other dimensions (such as course descriptions and examination methods of the programmes) were evaluated contributing to the overall low reliability of this system.

4 The information derives from an internal working paper from the Faculty of Social Sciences at Stockholm University. Notably, this is based on the former NQA, which was ended in 2014.

5 QS Top Universities: http://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/. The Company QS (Quacquarelli Symonds) World University Rankings ranks a total of 800 colleges and universities and its assessment is based on criteria such as impact on research, reviews from employers, teacher ratio, and proportion of international students.

References


