

Start from scratch!?

Towards a higher education policy for our era

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Summary

Higher education institutions evolve through a complex interaction of various forces, especially political ones. The interaction between politics and academia forms what we call higher education policy, a collective term for the financing, governance, and organization of higher education and research. Even though education and research operate in many ways within international contexts, their framework is usually national and shaped by the social relations within a nation, the form of the state, and the availability of various types of expertise.

With some regularity, Swedish higher education and research have been significantly and deliberately reshaped. Such higher education reforms have targeted the organization and financing of education and research and the conditions for interaction between institutions and society at large. Based on these dimensions, this report analyzes Swedish higher education policy development since the Second World War. What are the goals of the policy, and how has it been shaped and implemented?

Our specific contribution is to extrapolate the historical development to today's conditions and examine how we can learn from previous experiences of confronting profound societal changes.

The analysis is based on the understanding that changes in higher education policy require a combination of social mobilization, expertise, and institutional adaptation in a time of profound changes in technology, economics, and societal forms. Under such circumstances, there is significant space for political reforms. However, reform does not happen automatically; it requires agency and institutional change. Previous reforms have revolved around the emergence of the welfare

state and the mass production economy after World War II, as well as the microelectronic revolution and globalization in the 1980s and 1990s. Today, it is about the transition towards sustainability and inclusion in an unstable world.

Our sources are government publications and analyses of higher education reforms between 1945 and the present. We also compare with other countries, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Germany. These countries are comparable to Sweden in terms of investments in research and development as a percentage of GDP, as well as the forms of state funding and governance in education and research.

Our review of fundamental changes in Swedish higher education policy identifies several distinct phases with different forms of leadership, governance, and organization in higher education and research. The period from the end of World War II until about 1970 was characterized by the expansion of universities, increased funding for research, and the expansion of education. The approach was distinctly technocratic; society was to be rebuilt after the war experience and guided by rational resource planning, goals, and work methods developed in collaboration between the state, the business sector, and academia. The most important instruments for policy analysis and implementation were several central government investigations that set the framework for a rapid expansion of higher education and research.

Fundamentally, there was a solid consensus across political, social, and economic boundaries about the value of modernizing higher education and research. Institutions were to receive larger missions, research volume was to grow, and various societal missions were to be managed in parallel. The expansion of education and the growing role of research were regarded and handled as two separate processes, reflected in the financing and organization of these tasks. This development laid the foundation for one of the fundamental features of Swedish higher education policy: the separation of education and research.

In the mid-1970s, a similar review and adjustment of higher education policy occurred. The external conditions were less stable and the demands for social and economic restructuring were more urgently formulated as the long economic boom between 1945 and 1975 began to wane. Higher education policy reshaped the institutional landscape and established a group of new institutions. All higher education was

centralized in the state and adapted to fluctuations in the labor market. Research policy was coordinated, and universities' administrative and management structures were reformed to accommodate significantly greater influence from societal stakeholders. Higher education policy was thus "societized," and higher education institutions became part of the effort to create social, political, and economic stability in Sweden. This shift in higher education policy resulted from an extensive undertaking that consisted of analyzing and producing reports, formulating objectives, and forging a policy landscape that could implement the reforms. In this period, government investigations also played a central role, shaping opinions and exploring institutional alternatives. The investigations were thus devoted to analysis and anchoring. They served effectively as the engine of higher education policy. Universities, on their part, obediently followed the new policy direction, although there was some resistance and debate.

The transformation that occurred at the beginning of the 1990s continued in stages until the 2010s. The planned and structured model for Swedish higher education and research that had guided the two previous periods was abandoned.

Instead of planning and central control, the emphasis was on experimental adaptation. The state's role was primarily to inspire and follow up, not to direct. The extensive regulatory systems of institutions were drastically reduced, and higher education institutions were largely responsible for designing decision-making processes and strategies. During this period, the role of expertise changed significantly. Government investigations were still conducted, but they often had a more principled approach and developed scenarios rather than clear paths for the future. Many decisions also bore the mark of deliberations made rather hastily and in more limited policy contexts than in previous periods. Higher education institutions themselves, supported by simplified educational planning and pluralistic research funding, were expected to create a diverse landscape characterized by variation and renewal. The idea was that a flourishing, varied, and dynamic higher education landscape should be the bedrock of future prosperity and social fabric (or social relations?). Higher education policy became central to creating a Sweden where knowledge-based entrepreneurship and high technology would forge a new path in a globalized world. The ambitions were high but only partially realized for various reasons.

Deregulation did not lead to extensive institutional change and variety, and the pluralistic funding system resulted in fragmentation instead of diversity and competition.

Since 2010, Swedish higher education policy has been in a state of what we call "expansive stagnation": more resources and missions have been added, but the system has not been able to convert them into qualitative changes. Several factors have blocked change, and analysis is one of them; many government investigations in important areas have been conducted without a clear impact. Policymakers have struggled to agree on a common direction for higher education policy's link to the big issues of our time. The effect is a lack of an overarching direction in higher education policy and a clear connection to societal transition toward social, economic, and ecological sustainability.

This situation does not mean that the Swedish higher education system has stagnated; the system has continued to grow, and numerous initiatives have been taken. However, all attempts to comprehensively assess and create a coherent framework for Swedish higher education institutions have failed. Instead, policy is rather insular and fragmented, and problem diagnoses struggle to gain traction in policymaking and in the collective actions of higher education institutions. There is also a lack of clear political agency; universities and their representatives, on the whole, do not play that role, nor do government agencies or organizations. This lack of impetus is particularly problematic in a time of transformation where disruptive technologies, a new geopolitical context, and an increasingly palpable climate crisis fundamentally change our world. Moreover, the higher education sector faces many challenges, such as unclear career paths, insufficient engagement in – or responses to – complex issues regarding digitalization, skills development, and policy advice, and a lack of impact in breakthrough knowledge development.

Finally, we outline some suggestions for shaping a higher education policy for our time. This involves re-establishing a platform for expertise and analysis of the goals and means for higher education institutions making significant changes to how resources are allocated and distributed to affect behavior within higher education institutions and creating a common narrative about how higher education and research can contribute to a sustainable Sweden (in the Agenda 2030 sense of the term, i.e., combining economic, social, and environmental sustain-

ability). This narrative is needed to shape a long-term framework for the division of labor and tasks within the increasingly piecemeal and non-coherent Swedish higher education landscape and to ensure international visibility and national benefit of Swedish higher education and research. Such a framework does not conflict with the extensive decentralization of Swedish higher education policy in recent decades. Instead, it offers a coherent framework for developing universities and university colleges to benefit the country and the institutions. Such a framework could lay the foundation for a dynamic, evolving, and flourishing higher education landscape, which is the basis for knowledge, renewal, and freedom, which Sweden and the world need.

Some concrete examples of what we would like to see more of:

- › Multidisciplinary centers, institutes, or think tanks. An outstanding example is the Complexity Science Hub (CSH) in Vienna, whose vision is to "understand complexity to tackle present and future challenges." CSH's mission is "to host, educate, and inspire complex systems scientists, who are dedicated to make sense of Big Data in ways that are valuable for science and society. The Hub catalyzes research in a network of established scientists and the most creative, talented, and open-minded next-generation academics."
- › Knowledge overviews for complex societal issues written for decision-makers. Today's societal challenges can only be tackled with expertise from many different disciplines. At the same time, much of the research is becoming increasingly specialized and narrow. Therefore, knowledge overviews are needed to help decision-makers get an overview and understanding of the research frontier related to the issues they deal with.
- › More support for groundbreaking research. An interesting example is the Norwegian Research Council, which has this as one of its focus areas.
- › More innovation in higher education. This innovation includes not only content, form, and target audience within individual subjects and disciplines but also linking subjects and disciplines and perhaps even creating new subjects or disciplines.

When we compare the development in Sweden with certain other countries, some aspects are noticeable. Perhaps the most important is that Sweden lacks a common forum for higher education policy debate and analysis. Another is that the role and engagement of Swedish higher education institutions in higher education policy are less distinct and pronounced compared to countries like Switzerland, Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany, and Norway.

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