

Swedish Higher Education: Caught between Offering High- Quality Education or Education for the Masses?

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Summary

The number of students in higher education in Sweden has increased significantly since the mid-1990s. Swedish universities have gone from being elite universities to “mass universities,” making higher education available to wider segments of the population. One way of picturing the implications of this development is that an increasing recruitment of students means an increasing pressure on teachers to maintain the quality of higher education. On the other hand, the total funding, cost per student, and number of teachers at higher education institutions have also increased with the number of students. We argue that it is possible to explain these seemingly incompatible pictures regarding the implications of the increasing number of students by examining differences between universities in terms of funding and other aspects. Universities may alter the conditions for teachers in terms of salary, career paths, extent of research, and extent of teaching duties. This report uses differences in student populations at different universities as an indicator of educational challenges stemming from an increased number of students. We study the distribution of educational challenges across a selection of programs and universities by comparing admission scores, social background in terms of parents’ education, the students’ need for support in their studies, and the occurrence of disciplinary cases. In the report, we distinguish between two types of universities: (1) larger and older universities and (2) new colleges and universities.

The results show interesting differences in the student populations, and we observe a clear distinction between older and newer universities. In terms of admission scores, these differences are particularly

noticeable in certain degree programs. Newer universities also exhibit a higher level of disciplinary cases. Further, if we assume that upper secondary school grades correlate with study results in higher education, it is reasonable to conclude that teachers at newer colleges and universities face greater educational challenges.

We further examine the support and work conditions offered by different universities to support their teachers in addressing these educational challenges. A theoretical point of departure is that higher education institutions have access to several ways in which to improve the conditions for teachers and to compete with other universities by offering different “institutional packages” consisting of things such as salary, amount of teaching, research funding, and opportunities for further training and promotions. We also examine whether or not universities have created strategies to address the challenges of the increasing student population. A reasonable strategy could be to offer university teachers better conditions when it comes to time to teach, support students, and manage demanding student cases. Hence, we study a selection of institutional conditions for university teachers by measuring the number of hours that different institutions require teachers to teach to fulfill their annual teaching requirement. It is difficult to get a comparable number as different universities compensate for the same teaching effort (e.g., a lecture or laboratory session) with different numbers of hours. Hence, different work efforts are required at different universities to fulfill a given teaching requirement. In order to make comparisons, we have created a standardized “bouquet” of teaching tasks and requested information on the number of hours that a university lecturer is compensated for to carry out this “bouquet.” We have collected data on the proportion of teaching and compensation for teaching from all Swedish universities with nursing and social work programs, as well as subject studies in political science, sociology, and mathematics.

We draw two conclusions based on the analysis of the teaching conditions in our selection of studies. First, there is considerable variation between universities regarding the amount of teaching effort a lecturer is required to teach per year and how much research a lecturer is able to carry out, thus also how well their teaching relates to research. Second, the results do not show a clear pattern as to which types of universities offer better or worse conditions for teachers. There are older and newer

universities at both the top as well as the bottom of this list. The result rather indicates that universities use their ability to shape the teachers' conditions in terms of time for research. Some of the newer universities make good use of this ability, while several newer universities are also at the bottom of the list. At newer universities where investments have been made in these kinds of institutional packages, the teachers also face the greatest challenges in terms of the students' prior knowledge, social background, and needs. Hence, the proper conditions for offering high-quality education are lacking.

Further, we examine the effects of the increasing number of students and the strategies for managing such effects by means of interviews with directors of studies at a selection of higher education institutions. The effects that they identify are: revisions of the content of the education, increased use of teaching activities and examinations that require fewer resources, and that teachers feel inadequate as they know what is required for high-quality education but lack the ability to teach accordingly. Furthermore, there is a difference between older and newer universities in that older universities generally have a higher proportion of students with high admission scores and who also have parents with higher education degrees. The strategies used to address the effects of the increased and broadened student population described by the directors of studies are often individual strategies, such as teachers revising teaching hours, teaching content and methods, and/or teachers using their spare or research time to maintain the quality of the education. Joint strategies at the institutional level are less frequent. If, however, such strategies exist, there are common protocols and collegial discussions regarding priorities and solutions to meet the altered requirements and reduced resources. Higher education pedagogy courses and the acquisition of educational qualifications are more commonly used as strategies at newer universities.

This report also examines work environment and staff satisfaction as expressed in employee surveys conducted at universities during the period 2006–2022. The results show that teachers are generally proud of and satisfied with their work but not with their working conditions. Their work entails a high workload, a large amount of overtime work, and high levels of stress.

Drawing on the results of this report, we contribute to the discussion on the teaching and working conditions of Swedish higher edu-

cation teachers. Swedish higher education makes important contributions to society such as supplying skilled employees, preparing students for a complex labor market, and delivering research-based knowledge and solutions to problems in society. These are some of the reasons why high-quality higher education is of utmost importance. However, there is much to suggest that Swedish higher education is plagued by several problems. This is particularly the case at universities where the teachers face difficult educational challenges at the same time as their ability to manage these challenges is comparatively poor.

An important implication of the results is that there is a need to develop the measures used to compare Swedish universities. In debates on education and research policy, proposals have been made to direct research resources towards “excellent” research environments and to limit resources to other universities. Another suggestion along these lines is that not all teachers need to engage in research and that newer universities should focus on education while research funding is directed toward older universities. We disagree. For teaching to be related to research, teachers need to carry out research. Our results show that the opportunities for doing so are severely limited in the current design of teaching positions. Some of the universities with the highest proportion of students from social backgrounds with limited experience of higher education also offer the least resources for their teachers to carry out research.

In other words, students from homes with the least experience of higher education receive their education in the least research-intensive teaching environments. Students from more academic backgrounds receive their education in research-intensive environments. What we see is a form of Matthew effect of accumulated advantage for the ones who are already at an advantage. For teachers at higher education institutions with limited opportunities for carrying out research, limited research resources and a more demanding teaching assignment result in a dual negative effect. There are strong indications in our results that the challenges faced by teachers have consequences for their work situation. A policy implication is thus that when universities are compared, the different conditions for education and research should be considered to a greater extent. Today, universities and employees facing different conditions compete solely based on results as a measure of production and quality. Despite the differences between older and

newer universities, there are also newer universities where teachers have research resources comparable to those of teachers at the older universities, which shows that individual universities are able to act differently.

A further policy implication of our results is that there is a need to strengthen the possibility of combining research and teaching for all university teachers. Sweden has a research funding system largely based on research councils distributing research funding. In other Scandinavian countries, there are models where a larger portion of the resources is distributed directly to the universities. Such models do not exclude strategic investments in strong research environments, but they do strengthen research-related teaching for all teachers, including those who teach students at newer universities. There might be different models in terms of the balance between the distribution of research funding directly to the universities or via research councils. However, our results indicate that a greater allocation to the universities would enable not only more people to be given access to higher education but also that more people are given access to high-quality higher education.

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