

**19TH EAN ANNUAL CONFERENCE
SÖDERTÖRN UNIVERSITY STOCKHOLM 14TH – 16TH JUNE 2010**

**WIDENING PARTICIPATION
AND
THE CHANGING ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN A GLOBALISED
WORLD**

The theme that I want to discuss in this paper is related to an analysis of some of the trends in the discourse on higher education and its changing role in a globalised world; and to give you some thoughts on the discussion on widening access and recruitment of underrepresented groups in society to higher education. This is of course a theme which cannot be covered within the frameworks for this paper, so I can only give you a hint of my way of analyzing what is happening within the Swedish and European context.

Higher education and research has been identified as the most important vehicle in order to make the European countries or rather the members of the European Union more compatible. The first decade of this new millennium has been characterized by different crisis. In the first years we had a problematic situation within the IT-industry and for the last couple of years there has been what is called a financial crisis. The only thing that we can be sure of is that there will be more crises to come. These crises are affecting the universities more and more, the more important the universities becomes the more they will be intertwined with the economical development.

The globalization process can be seen and felt onto your bare skin all over the world. This is also one of the signs of the closer connectedness between what is happening in different countries. The rhymes in the national economies have become more and more overlapping, which means that a crisis in one part of the world soon thereafter will be a crisis in the rest of the world.

For the last thirty years or so there has been developing a discourse saying that the future society is a knowledge society. In the Western world this has been given the meaning that “we” are losing jobs within the industrial sector to other parts of the world, the labor force is too cheap in these parts of the world, so the only way the European countries can stay compatible is to have a better educated working force than the “others”. This can make Europe competitive again, but now based on a knowledge-based production and an economic order where the service sector becomes more and more important.

This kind of analysis has gone hand in hand with a new policy for higher education. The so called Bologna process can be seen as part of this new policy. It has been implemented in order to make it easier for students to move between the different universities all over Europe. Two of the most important ideas behind the Bologna process have been to direct attention to the learning of students, i.e. more attention on the learning by the students than on the teaching, and – secondly, on the employability of the students.

The universities within the EU have implemented this new policy and they have also put forward the question of an increasing autonomy for the universities. The saying goes, within the European Universities Association (EUA), that it is necessary to increase the autonomy for the universities in order to make it possible for them or us to respond to the demands from business as well as from politics in a more rational and efficient way. But every coin has two sides, and the demand on increasing autonomy is followed by a demand on accountability. The national states want to be sure that they get value for the tax payers' money. This discussion on accountability has strengthened the emphasis on measurable results, not only expressed in economical terms, but also in terms of quality in higher education as well as in research. Ranking list is one symptom in this context as well as the focus on New Public Management within the universities.

You can say that the policies discussed for the changes of higher education are concentrating on three different points:

- The knowledge society and the demands on a more well educated labor force
- A closer connection between education, research and innovation, often expressed within the frameworks of the “knowledge triangle”.
- A movement from focusing on only technological innovation to social innovation, from innovation within the industrial sector to the service sector.

During the Swedish period of being the chair of the EU in the autumn 2009 there was a drive towards putting the “knowledge triangle” on the political agenda. Depending on what focus you have on the different legs there will follow different kinds of policies. Until now it has been the research leg that has dominated the scene, with more and more emphasis put on the connection to innovation. This has been identified as one of the competitive weaknesses within Europe in comparison with the US. An attempt is made to change the dominant thought figure that first we do research at the universities, then - foremost within medicine and technology – hopefully innovation will take place as a result of the new knowledge. But this does of course not always happen.

The third leg has not been discussed so much within this new framework. That there should be a close connection between research and higher education is of course a foundation stone within the so called Humboldt ideology. But, what about the relationship between innovation and education? Can we develop this connection in new ways?

And – as I soon will go on to – what happens with widening participation in this context?

What about widening participation?

This is one way to describe what is happening on the policy level in Europe. And it will not come as a big surprise that the discussion on widening participation, including recruitment of students coming from non-academic homes and an inclusive approach to

all the different kinds of students, is no longer on the political agenda. No, I would say that Ben Wildawsky in his book *The Great Brain Race* (2010) is more close to the dominant agenda in his headline in one of the chapters in the book: “Wanted: World-Class Universities.” He writes the following in the first part of his book:

My goal in these pages is to chronicle and analyze the growing globalization of higher education in all its dimensions: the ever-more-intense recruitment of students and faculty; the swift spread of branch campuses; the well-financed efforts to create world-class universities, whether by upgrading existing institutions or by building brand-new ones; the innovative efforts by online universities and other for-profit players to fill up unmet needs in higher education markets around the globe; and the closely watched ranking by which everyone keep score. These rankings are increasingly taking new forms as they are refined to capture vital elements of the university experience, notably how much students actually learn while on campus. ¹

In these universities there is no room for the non-elites. The ideology of finding the best brains in the world can of course mean that you will try to find them in other social layers than the usual, but that do not seem to be the case in any greater extent.

If we take a quick look at the other side of the coin I can take one example from Sweden. In the 1970's and on many new universities and university colleges were established in different regions in Sweden. We can now see that there has been a very positive development in these regions, where the universities were established. People living there have chances to form new lives to an extent that would not have been possible for them to realize, if the university was not there. And if they had been forced to leave their region, most of them would never have come back. The development in that region would then have become another, probably not as positive as it has been, thanks to the possibilities given by the closeness to higher education.

The expansion of the number of Swedish universities and of course number of students was done by including some of the semi-professions into academia. Nurses, social workers and teachers for all ages in the school system now became part of the student body at the universities. This meant that many students from non-academic homes were recruited to the universities. And this can be said to be the most effective way of widen the recruitment from other social layers than the upper classes. But, at the same time we can say that we built into the Swedish higher education system a social and gender division within in. Even though the education of nurses, social workers and so forth now was part of the university the old recruitment pattern is still dominating. This means that we still have a lot of work to do in finding ways within the universities to break down old barriers.

In the latest report from the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education from 2009 on the progress of the work of widening participation the Agency is defining the variables to be measured in the following way:

¹ Wildawsky, B., *The Great Brain Race*, 2010, p. 2 – 3.

Social background - the level of the parents' education

Foreign background – people who are either born outside Sweden or both of the parents born outside Sweden

All Swedish universities and university colleges in Sweden shall work with widening recruitment. The Agency very shortly discusses in the above mentioned report the concept of widening participation. But if you have a look on what they measure it is not so easy to follow how they have implemented a more social inclusive attitude in this. The authors are aware of the changes that have taken place within the discourse on widening participation, but they do still only measure social background.

The result in the report is that the universities are working with this problem, and they do it in quite different ways and report their work also in quite different ways. So, one of the conclusions must be that the way of measuring the background, social or foreign, is not good enough in order to catch what the universities really are doing. We shall also be aware of the fact that the universities are supposed to work with widening participation but there is not incentive for us to do so. There is no policy developed on national level, which the universities can implement and then get credit for their work. So why should the universities in Sweden do this work? Is widening participation a concept of social justice? And if, how do you implement that in relation to the now dominant discourse on finding the best brains?

Sometimes it can be interesting to have a look a little bit further back in history. Almost sixty years ago we had in Sweden a discussion on the problem of recruiting students. In those days only a few per cent of each generation were going to the universities. Most of them came from the upper classes, very few from the working class. In those days we had a social democratic government with a strong interest in developing the educational system, from the bottom to the top. But what kind of arguments could be used in order to argue for another way of recruiting students? It was not only a question of building a just system, giving all the same chances in life. It was also necessary to convince the conservatives that there were many intelligent young people in the working class that could handle a higher education.

Within the discipline of pedagogic a new concept was born, a concept constructed to show that it would be possible to recruit not just a few extremely gifted young people from the working class, but the recruitment at the same level as from the upper classes. The concept, *the reserve of talents*, was created to catch this and also give the politicians a scientifically based concept which would make it possible to change the higher educational system in Sweden.

The researchers argued that there was no reason to believe that the distribution of talent or intelligence is different in the lower classes than in the upper classes. So, if two thirds of the upper class could send their sons – they were still the dominating sex at the universities in those days – then it could and should be possible for the lower classes to send also two thirds of their youngsters to the universities.

The Swedish government thought that it was not a good idea of losing so much talent. The argument was formulated on the macro level, on the individual level the changes of attitude within the working class and other social layers not accustomed to academia, was the harder nut to crack. And you could say that there was not until the expansion of the number of universities into all regions in Sweden that a significant higher number of young people from the lower classes were recruited to the universities.

You can get a hint of the ideological climate in the fifties reading the book *The Rise of Meritocracy 1870 – 2033* (1958) by Michael Young. Here he formulated the concept of meritocracy and was pushing for the idea that all people should have the same chances in life, independent of what social layer you were born in.

Looking at the policy level you can say that widening recruitment has been a politically important question in Sweden. But this policy has not been followed by a more concrete political decision to allocate some resources to the universities to fulfill this task.

So far you can say that working with widening participation – if my analysis is correct – has disappeared from the political agenda. And now, when the discussion is more and more concentrated on recruitment of international students all over the world, it seems to me that the question we are discussing here will be even more invisible in the political discourse.

Maybe we can find a way out from this. I do think that there are some possibilities in relation to an upcoming discussion on diversity, i.e. diversity in all its aspects, not just social or ethnic diversity among the students.

The Concept of Diversity – a new possible discourse?

The demands and expectations on the universities all over the world are increasing. There is a formulated hope that the universities will play a crucial role in solving the grand problems that the world is facing the coming decades. The universities are also supposed to give a substantial contribution to the well-being of our societies. In order to do so and fulfill the expectations the dominant policy within higher education and research has focused on the elite and on a one-dimensional way of attacking the problems. All universities are supposed to be measured by the same kind of standard. Quality is the key word in the policy, but the way of measuring it is not adapted to the tasks that the universities have for the future.

Let me conclude this paper by some reflections on what a more diversified approach would mean and why we need a more diversified higher education landscape in the individual countries as well as in Europe and all over the world.

There are more than 3000 universities in Europe, probably more than 10.000 universities all over the world. The ranking systems include 200 or sometimes 500 of these

universities. Most of the universities you cannot detect in these measurement systems. This does also mean that we really do not know what all the universities are doing and how good they are in doing what they really do.

Within the European Union you can find a start on a new debate concerning diversity. One book is edited by Frans A. van Vught, with the informative title *Mapping the Higher Education Landscape*, where van Vught in the preface is saying the following;

This book is the result of a project focused on the development of an instrument able to create useful and effective transparency in the diversity of European higher education.²

This project can be seen as one sign of finding a role to play for all the universities, and maybe some of them will take on the role to be “excellent” in widening participation. Another example we can find in a fascinating study, *Institutional diversity in European Higher Education. Tensions and Challenges for policy makers and institutional leaders*, by Sybille Reichert, who draws the following conclusion in her summary:

Current higher education debates often lead us to believe that institutional diversity is generally regarded as beautiful, as a value in its own right. As this study has shown, the values of diversity clearly lie in the eye of the beholder, with different aspects of diversity being prioritized or ignored in different institutional or national contexts. Very few diversity values seem to be shared in the same manner across national or institutional boundaries. Even among the aspects of diversity which are most often positively valued, such as diversity of institutional profiles or functional differentiation of higher education institutions (and their staff profiles), the exact notion associated with this value, e.g. how the different types of institutions should be defined and promoted, or along which dimensions professorships should be differentiated, differ greatly from one national, regional and institutional context to the next.³

Reichert differs between five aspects of diversity; 1) various target communities; 2) emphases on different dimensions of higher education activities; 3) programmes of subject profiles, creating institutional profiles with different mixes on a continuum from academic to professional orientation; 4) staff profiles; 5) the student profiles which institutions seek to be defined by and which may vary with respect to their qualifications, geographical or national origins or other aspects of their background, with different modalities of admission contributing to institutional profiles.

The most interesting aspect for us in this context, working with widening participation and social inclusion, is of course the last one. But we cannot isolate the different aspects from each other. I do believe that we must see that one position in the fifth aspect will

² Van Vught, F.A., (ed) *Mapping the Higher Education Landscape. Towards a European Classification of Higher Education*, (2009) preface

³ Reichert, S., *Institutional diversity in European higher education*, (2009) p. 122

force you to take the consequences on the other aspects. But in Reicherts study we cannot see if that is so.

She has looked into 118 institutions in five European countries. The result was that, when it comes to the aspect of diversity of students, that there was a relative indifference to this aspect. The only exception was England, because there ...

Institutional autonomy and financial incentives combine to produce more explicit institutional diversity policies and targeted measures to address diversity of student backgrounds than can be observed in the other four countries.

.....

Only in England has student diversity become a feature which contributes to defining institutional profiles, primarily in terms of diversity of student qualifications, and in some cases of socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds.⁴

It was not a surprising result. But what I do think most interesting with this study is that it shows on the one hand that there must be some financial support for widening participation, otherwise most universities do other things, especially when the dominant discourse is focusing on the elite in all its aspects. On the other hand, Reichert gives us an approach to rethink widening participation within the frameworks of diversity. And I will finish my paper with some reflections on this from my experience as vice-chancellor for a young university, only 12 years old.

Malmö University

Malmö University was founded in 1998 in the city of Malmö, an old industrial city, where most of the old industry had disappeared in the 1970's. The educational level of the inhabitants was lower than average in Sweden. In order to shape a new, more creative and modern Malmö, the politicians decided that Malmö needed a university.

Now we have about 25,000 students. Our educational profile is towards education for the professions with an emphasis on close cooperation with local and regional business in order to, with the help of them, prepare our students for the future. As the inhabitants in Malmö has changed from a city dominated by industrial workers to a multicultural city, with over 170 different languages spoken and among the young people more than half of them have some kind of foreign background. This is a radical shift taking place in twenty years.

In this context we are creating a new university, where the one-liner in our vision is formulated as "Where diversity makes a difference". The idea is that we shall work with all our different students, we have been quite successful in widening participation and are now working hard on the inclusive attitude among all our staff as well as all students. We believe that in order to make use of the diversity we must let the students experiences be part of our education. We are developing an active way of handling knowledge, as we

⁴ Ibid. P. 131

think that knowledge must be used, and that we must train our students so that they can make use of their knowledge in different kinds of contexts.

At the same time we must not forget the cultivating side of knowledge. Academic studies is also meant to give you a more reflective way of dealing with all kinds of problems, we try to give them *knowledge habitats* that will stay with them for ever. We do also have the ambition that all our students shall have a reflective understanding of three different aspects, gender, ethnicity and sustainable development, all three the perhaps most important questions when you are concerned with power in society and democracy.

Perhaps the best description of what we are trying to achieve was formulated by one of our international students; “I came to Malmö University, because I wanted to meet a little UN every day during my studies”. Can we reach that goal? I do think that we have the diversity among our students that we strive for.

This is in short how we work in a new university in order to make use of diversity among our students. I hope that we can go on in a successful way with this work, and it is always easier to do it if you can develop these important themes together with other universities.

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