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Björn Åstrand: *Diversity and homogeneity: notions on the role of higher education in democratic societies*

1. Introduction: mixed views on change and continuity

Educational systems, including higher education, appear to be as important and multidimensional as tricky to understand and describe. When it comes to higher education, listening to the societal debate, it tends to be characterized by being monolithic, traditional, looks the same year after year and in often, according to politicians, higher education has to change rapidly and profoundly to better fulfill its societal role, which at least when it comes to publicly funded institutions, equals to more payback to taxpayer and more of boosting economy by patents, products and profit.

Listening to discussions within the sector another picture evolves, arguing that institutional and departmental reforms are to frequent, programs are redesigned too often and condition for research are too short sighted to promote substantial progress. But, what’s most important, when it comes to this mixed view of conflicting perspectives on continuity and change, it is of greatest importance whether there are sufficient continuity and sufficient change in key areas and with well-tuned direction and speed.

This paper is written in a context of a sense of growing need in higher education to envision a new contract between higher education and the wider society recognizing the importance of mass higher education in democratic society. The last decades of deliberation on autonomy in higher education have to be continued into a conversation on autonomy as prerequisite for higher education institutions democratic roles in increasingly complex societies. This paper studies this theme by bringing together studies of institutional strategies and practices as well as voices from leaders and teachers on key educational issues.

A split view on the education system

There seems to be a need for a perspective on higher education that does not lose sight of prior levels in the educational system. Swedish pre-, primary and secondary education became transformed profoundly and rapidly in the years around 1990. It shifted from one of the more centralized systems to a globally uniquely decentralized model. International scholars have argued that the Swedish school system nowadays is extreme. Sweden as a society has been characterized over the last decades by this kind of transformations and the pace, scope and willingness to reform seems maybe a bit unique. In the national discourse on higher education it is despite those two facts (the rapid change of school system and the profound reform orientation) rather unusual with perspectives contextualizing higher education to this reform intensity. According to a recent study it

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has though been observed internationally but studies bridging the divide between K-12 and post secondary education are rare.\(^5\)

**With growing seize and increased importance roles changes**

In the beginning of the 1950s, the annual number of new students enrolled in higher education was approximately 4000, and the total number of students in higher education was barely 20000.\(^6\) At the time the total Swedish population amounted to 7 million.\(^7\) In 2005 the Swedish population had risen to 9 million, a quite modest growth. At the same time the number of students in Swedish higher education exploded to nearly 400000, in comparison a quite remarkable phenomena.\(^8\)

This development in Sweden shares its basic features with educational change in most European countries during the period after Second World War and as such it included several important discussions on higher education issues as equal access, local and regional presence, quality etc. Taken together, growth in numbers, finance and debate displays the fact that post-secondary education was given another role in the postwar period than traditionally. In relation to this process a discussion on the purposes with higher education has of course also occurred. Furthering of knowledge, creating and promoting economic growth and/or developing and reinforcing democracy, has been advocated as appropriate societal aims. New knowledge and growth has had a prominent place in the debate, maybe less so with democracy and human rights. The right to speak freely is though profoundly essential for higher education why promotion of such rights seems to be important for the sector. Also, the massive shift in size of higher education and the proportion of citizens participating in the sector (students, teachers, researchers, administrators etc.) appears to call for a reformulation of, and increased emphasis on, democracy and values in higher education institutions, preferably on its societal role in general and particular on undergraduate studies.

A report from American colleges and universities though claimed:

> Democracies are founded on a distinctive web of values: human dignity, equality, justice, responsibility, and freedom. The meanings and applications of these values are rarely self-evident and frequently contested. Moreover, most students never actually study such issues in any formal way, either in school or in college. Many students … do not think that civic engagement is even a goal for their college studies.\(^9\)

Usually, primary and secondary schools are assigned a responsibility to take on this task of anchoring democratic beliefs, behaviors and approaches. But, as mentioned above, the sheer seize of higher education attendance nowadays, calls for a rethinking of the role of higher education in this

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\(^5\) Unemar Öst, I. (2009), Kampen om den högre utbildningens syften och mål. En studie av svensk utbildningspolitik. Örebro: Örebro universitet, p26; C.f Åstrand 2013B

\(^6\) Grundläggande högskoleutbildning. Former för politik och planering. Utredningar från riksdagen, 1996/97:URD4, p8

\(^7\) Statistisk årsbok 2013, Stockholm: Statistics Sweden, p67

\(^8\) Richardsson, G. (2010), Svensk utbildnings historia, skola och samhälle förr och nu, Lund: Studentlitteratur, s143. The figures are not fully compatible due to reforms of tertiary education in 1970s making the system more uniform (i.e. HE come to include also professional and vocational studies). Still, the figures display the post war massification of post-secondary education familiar to most industrialized countries.

perspective. Also, it appears important for the future to explore what kind of learning experiences would be desirable in academic postsecondary programs in this respect. Pre-tertiary education has developed approaches to democracy and societal values and for higher education institutions it can be argued that according to its current importance and for future societies an increased or revitalized discussion on what the contribution from higher education more precisely should consists in is urgent.

The declaration on human rights states in the preamble that all peoples, all nations, every individual and every organ of society “shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms.” The Swedish constitution requires all public institutions to take on this task, they “shall promote the ideals of democracy as guidelines in all sectors of society.” Also, it is demanded from those institutions to exercise public power “with respect for the equal worth of all and the liberty and dignity of the individual” together with promotion of “sustainable development leading to a good environment for present and future generations.” Of interest here is to what degree this impetus impacts the discourses within higher education institutions in contemporary Sweden and how institutions and individuals of the academic community have come internalize this and to what degree they give voice to such ideas.

**Historical and contemporary ideas about the role of higher education**

Higher education is obviously in a period of change on several levels. The Lisbon agenda pointed towards a particular understanding of the value of higher education. That utilitarian notion still persists in *The Higher Education Modernization Agenda*: “Higher education, with its links with research and innovation, plays a crucial role in personal development and economic growth, providing the highly qualified people and the articulate citizens that Europe needs to create jobs and prosperity.” The agenda balances in this portal paragraph individual and societal aspects but in the following line it narrows what’s it all about: “If Europe is not to lose out to global competition in the fields of education, research and innovation, national higher education systems must be able to respond effectively to the requirements of the knowledge economy.” (European Commission). The argument is a bit surprising, as it does not follow by logic, that personal development leads to a commitment to international competition favoring Europe as a continent. Based on this we have to understand the position of European Commission on higher education along a tradition of understanding higher educations role as mainly economical on a societal level and reforms are directed towards change and promotion of initiatives along this idea.

Historically other ideas have been articulated. John Henry Newman focused in 19th century on another level, as his notion of the very idea of a university consisted in its character of being “a place of teaching universal knowledge.” Accordingly, his emphasis was on the impact higher education
studies have on individual students and the university as an end in itself.\textsuperscript{14} We can add other ideas as well: the Humboldt model including the tradition of \textit{bildung} and the classical research university as examples of ideas with higher education, partly challenged today by changing notions in the aftermath of MOOCs, private or public.\textsuperscript{15} Current traditions stretches between the more idealistic \textit{bildung}-approach (romanticist in origin) and the profoundly utilitarian and employability oriented one.

There is a rich tradition of notions about higher education and universities. One of the more unusual texts is Clark Kerrs \textit{The Uses of the University}. Initially it was a publication of his Godkin lectures at Harvard in 1963 but since then he has added new chapters more or less every decade commenting upon change and challenges and as such it displays how the university has become a “multiversity” harboring a variety of purposes.\textsuperscript{16} As for Kerr, change appears natural for another American scholar; Harold T Shapiro argues: “In an environment that is changing, the university will inevitably be the subject of debates about the relationship of existing programs’ connectedness with its commitments to the changing needs of society.”\textsuperscript{17}

This short recollection of varied ideas on the purpose of higher education (as on what is understood as desirable) can be viewed as a bricolage of possibilities for institutional strategies in higher education in their understanding of their past and what’s essential for the future. As indicated above, the overarching theme in this paper concerns the societal role of those institutions from the perspective of democracy. This paper starts with an analysis of institutional strategies and what is displayed in them regarding their role in society. Those findings are contextualized by an overview of governmental arguments on the role of higher education. The second part of the article shifts focus from institutional level to the level of individuals and outlines characteristics of the discourse present among leaders and teachers on democracy and values education in relation to notions of the purpose of studies. Finally, this paper engages in a discussion on key aspects of differences between institutional and individual approaches.

A final clarification is that the focus in this study is on purposes as intentions and ideas rather than how higher education in fact function in society or opinions primarily about that. Different aspects of higher educations societal role may well be captured in the later perspective, as for example Mitchell Stevens has pictured higher education functions with metaphors sieve, incubator, temple and hub.\textsuperscript{18}

The perspective applied here is another, focusing on articulated ideas on the purpose from either within higher education or from its constituencies.

\textsuperscript{17} Shapiro, H. T. (2005), \textit{A Larger Sense of Purpose, Higher Education and Society}, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p37
2. Strategies and practices – indications on top level homogeneity

Higher education is a remarkable mix of change and continuity. As such, and in institutionalized form, it has survived over a millennia and of course there has been challenging instances during history and it seems as if bot change and an enduring continuity has served as recipes for that. An emergent question seems though to be whether a sufficient amount of change had occurred, when and in what respect (as of necessary continuity). This study does not investigate this in full but in this part it is focused on what articulated strategies in higher education reveals about how those institutions understands the current situation and what it requires from them.

A: Dominant and absent positions in Swedish higher educations institutional strategies 2009-2012

What profiles and features have institutional strategies in current Swedish higher education and what does it reveals of their institutional understanding of the its role? Institutional strategy plans are not that easy to compare. One problem for a comparison is that strategies are developed in different years, with different scope and context. The occurrence of strategy documents in Swedish higher education institutions are not within a mandatory framework. If so had been the case, there had been opportunities to make selections from different years and study change over time. Of course there are internal documents of similar kind but they comes with the same differences as mentioned above. There are though a possibility to study strategic plans originating from a shared framework, a collection of documents in which institutions outwardly explains their analysis of contemporary society and sketches which direction they find desirable to take.

Swedish higher education contains both public and private institutions. In general they all depend on public funding and are regulated under the same laws. In 2007, the Swedish government (ministry of education) required all institutions to submit strategies for the period 2009-2012. The requirement can be viewed as part of the Swedish system of open consultations that precedes main decisions. In this case the outcome of the exercise was supposed to give input to the forthcoming governmental proposition on higher education and research. Institutions were asked to submit a document containing national and international analysis of current situation and describing how the institution in respects understand and planned for their future.

The advantage with those strategies is in a comparative perspective, that they all emanate from one and the same governmental task. All institutions had to respond at the same time, all had the same opportunities to outline their understanding of higher education, its conditions, its challenges and optimal ways ahead together with a wider analysis of the society, local, national and global. Of course all institutions differ, as does their contexts and constraints. But that’s the very point. Given that kind of diversity, together with regional situations and academic profiles, together with different local approaches (an administrative response from the local administration or a bottom up work giving voice to wider collegial deliberations?) etc. – what were their notions and primarily, what are theirs priorities??

19 If the opinions voiced in those documents were taken into account in the political process are an interesting issue but a one this study doesn’t address.  
20 Governmental decision of March 15 2007, Assignment to develop strategies for research and studies, U2007/2147/UH
Nearly forty institutions was required to submit those strategies, 37 did provide documents containing visions on their future. From experience it is known that institutions respond to such in more or less two ways. Always a comment on all questions raised, polite and correct but responses always also contains opinions that were not asked for, but of importance for the local institution. What is unusual in this case is the fact that the requested document cannot just be an internal administrative response, as it has to represent the official strategies for the institution. That aspect adds pressure to the writes and that makes those documents especially interesting.

On an average each of those documents contain 15 pages, many of them carefully designed and printed nicely as documents representing the institutions highest ambitions. Some are not that fashionable designed but some are, but they all bears sign of being carefully crafted. Together they amount to approximately 500 pages. If they all should have been administrative top down products, lets say that only three persons at each institution had been involved, then they represent dominant perspectives among more than 100 top academic leaders. If these documents have been into processes of some more collegial deliberation, lets say involving deans, faculty boards and committee's for research and program studies it is more likely that more then 1000 individuals (something like 30 persons per institution) have taken part in this.

So, – what do those strategies look like? What’s the message within those strategies? The first impression is that they apply one and the same perspective and that they more or less utilize one and the same set of concepts as is listed below.

**Tabel 1: Concepts in strategies for Swedish higher education institutions (2007, alphabetical order)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Autonomy</th>
<th>Innovation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bologna process</td>
<td>Internationalization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration (with surrounding society)</td>
<td>Lisbon strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercialization (of research)</td>
<td>Quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employability</td>
<td>Quality assurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental issues/climate change</td>
<td>Prioritization/concentration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellence</td>
<td>Research based education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Globalization</td>
<td>(forskningsanknytning)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth</td>
<td>Sustainable development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

21 One larger higher education institution was terminated and merged within Stockholm University (Stockholm Teacher College, LHS) and one other strategy is just absent in the collection at the ministry. All main institutions did meet the requirement and their strategy document is used here.
It appears as when one hundred, or maybe one thousand of assumingly the “best and the brightest” in Swedish higher education describes the current situation (2007), and what’s most important, what to do, then less than 20 concepts dominate and creates the perspectives. What are we witnessing here? The institutional strategy documents differs significantly from a description in current research of four main discourses (Unemar Öst 2009, below). One can contemplate upon why these differences exist but what’s most interesting here is something else – the fact that the institutional discourses appears to be without any main differences. It is as if all those institutions speaks with one voice, a mainstreaming that is astonishing! Have in mind that those institutions differs profoundly in:

- Age (inaugurated in 15\textsuperscript{th} century to 21\textsuperscript{st})
- Seize (30 students up to 50000)
- Focus (broad institutions – specialized)
- Task (traditional – particular purposes, for ex widening participation)
- Location (urban - rural)
- Ranking (from invisible in rankings to different prestigious positions among European and Global higher education institutions, some among top 100 globally and some on top 30 of the institutions of age under 50 years age etc.)

The fact that they all seem to display similar analyses and views on the future is striking. Of course there are some differences, one concerns whether the strategies have a mainly outward or inward-looking approach:

\textbf{Tabel 2: Strategic orientation}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of institution</th>
<th>Inward</th>
<th>Outward</th>
<th>Articulated comb.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Broad</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialized</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclear: 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Typical inward looking approach includes aims

- to become a leading institution
- at being upgraded from university college to university status
- to raise quality in their business
- at becoming an attractive alternative for a) higher education studies or b) allocation of research project.

All of those approaches follow the globalization discourse agenda. So do the more outward looking approaches as well. They aim to:

- contribute to growth and societal development
- become a driving actor/player in regional development
- contribute to sustainable development
- contribute to increased health and improved living conditions
In conclusion, 2 out of 3 institutions articulate a more inward oriented approach in the sense that their strategies displays priorities that relates to the higher education sector to larger extent than to the society. This tendency seems stronger among older, larger and broader type of institutions. Only one in the top cohort of six this kind institution takes another approach than an inward looking.\textsuperscript{22} So, there are differences but they are not that particular strong. Instead is the overwhelming impression unison.

In a study on Swedish higher education institutions between 1992 and 2007 Ingrid Unemar Öst found four competing discourses on HE in the mainly governmental documents she used as source for her study:

- The classical academic discourse
- The discourse of globalization
- The discourse of democracy
- The discourse of individual identity

She argues that the globalization discourse has “hegemonic tendencies” in two senses. It presents concepts that other discourses has to fill with their own meaning but by this process the globalizing agenda sets the premises for others and the globalization discourse also includes concepts from the other discourses but reshape their meaning into denoting other aspects.

**Table 3: Education policy discourses in Sweden 1992–2007**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DIS-COURSE</th>
<th>The classical academic discourse</th>
<th>The discourse of globalization</th>
<th>The discourse of democracy</th>
<th>The discourse of individual identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nodal point</td>
<td>Classical academic ideals</td>
<td>Internationalization</td>
<td>Democracy</td>
<td>Individual identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myth</td>
<td>The Magna Carta of the University</td>
<td>The European Higher Education Area</td>
<td>The open University</td>
<td>The multi cultural society</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| The aims and purposes of higher education | To search for and hand over new knowledge and to contribute to the development of society  
- Academic freedom  
- Research connection  
- Scientific attitude | To strengthen Swedish and European competitiveness and to contribute to economic growth  
- The needs of the labor market  
- Excellence  
- Employability  
- Comparability | To confirm democracy and contribute to equality and justice  
- Cooperation and interaction – Diversity  
- Widening participation  
- Student  
- Influence | To support the identity formation process and support those values that are common across cultural boundaries  
- Multi culturalism  
- Reflexive thinking  
- Autonomy |

Source: Unemar Öst 2009\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{22} Linköping University presents an articulated combination.

\textsuperscript{23} Unemar Öst (2009), p234
My point here is, that when the finding above on current higher education strategies is viewed in the perspective of the analysis Unemar Öst provides on official and governmental documents (such as ministerial and parliamentarian inquires and governmental proposals) it seems as if those independent higher education institutions more or less exclusively voices only the globalization discourse, or at least that it by far appears to be the dominant discourse.\textsuperscript{24} This is a bit surprising and to deepen the picture it can be valuable to also try to pin point what is not voiced in the strategies (viewed from an educational perspective).

What’s missing?

When studying higher education institutional strategies the easy part is of course to compare what’s written in those texts, but of equal importance is as well to study what’s not articulated. To look for something missing can be a tricky exercise why caution is needed. But if the analysis departs from something sector specific, like the four discourses above or the well-known models for higher education institutions we can derive some ideas of what worth looking for:

- The Napoleonic/Imperial model (direct state control, emphasis on training elite and officials servants, knowledge transmission)
- The Humboldtian model (independent from government interference, unity of research and teaching, knowledge production)
- The British model (institutional autonomy, residentially, personal development, intellectual growth and knowledge production)
- US model (market driven, combining features from the other models, pragmatism and service to national economy, student centered approach, particularly in liberal arts colleges)\textsuperscript{25}

Given these different models, the impacts of studies on the individual student in a more profound and life shaping, formative sense appears important as does ideas on those institutions societal role. Consequently the classical \textit{bildung} concept that runs deep in the academic history and notions of what role these institutions have in democratic societies will be the focus of next part of this study.

\textbf{Bildung}

The \textit{bildung} aspect is not fully missing but it is only partially present due to a small set of institutions, none of the large and traditional universities, that at least touches on those aspects. Two of the Swedish higher education institutions have in their slogans or so concepts like \textit{bildung}, citizen \textit{bildung}.\textsuperscript{26} One institution that has distinguished itself as the one most articulated attempt to establish a liberal arts college in Sweden does not mention \textit{bildung} but one can understand their approach as driven by such an approach.\textsuperscript{27} Three universities of the younger cohort are though more articulated. Karlstad University describes its role as also related to a \textit{bildung} concept of a kind that has to do with formation of independent and autonomous individuals that takes responsibility in

\textsuperscript{24} \citet{Unemar2009} p104
\textsuperscript{26} Södertörn University College and University College Malmö
\textsuperscript{27} University College Gotland, recently merged with Uppsala University. It should though be noted that this institution mainly argues for the value of a liberal arts education in terms of a being a proper preparation a changeable society, work life and for business/entrepreneurship.
society. Växjö University (nowadays merged with University College in Kalmar into Linnaeus University) comments in their strategies that they, as an higher education institution, has a wider mission for *bildung* than what is required from labor market and contemporary students. In addition MidSweden University states in their strategies that *bildung* is an import area of research within that institution.

So, the classical approach of *bildung*, a search for knowledge without predefined goals, is present but only marginal. In the wider perspective it seems more or less fully replaced by an educational idea of targeted learning for other purposes and *bildung*, regardless as understood as content, or a process, appears mainly absent from higher education institutional strategies in Sweden.

### Democracy and values

Many higher education institutions in Sweden have extensive research relating to democracy why it is surprising that only four institutions mention democracy as a research focus within the institution. One could reflect upon whether that mirrors ideas on quality within the filed, or whether it is political incorrect to label relevant research as such or maybe it is renamed into something else, as sustainable development?

There are though some institutions that touch upon the issue. Uppsala University express that they expect that their students will develop democratic competence during their period of study. University College of Gävle positions the institution as such as a part of democratic process and University College in Borås states in their strategies that democracy is a prerequisite for higher education and research as for a desired societal development. Chalmers University of Technology advocates an approach based on democratic values, independent research and freedom of speech. In addition, they also recognizes that international collaboration with higher education institutions in non-democratic countries creates a problem and that they are in search of a balanced approach that recognize this problem but also the scientific need to find partners unconditioned of political agendas.

A small number of institutions voices as indicated above that they understand themselves in a societal perspective of democracy and a small number of higher education institutions also points to democratic values.

On the level of core concepts in strategies, higher education seems to surface as a societal sector with a high degree of consensus. Also it seems as they almost all institutions have avoided *bildung* and democracy in their articulated strategies. *Bildung* one could assume should be present by tradition and democracy by challenges in contemporary society. I guess, that if we approached those vice-chancellors and university presidents with questions on this – they almost all should respond that those issues are of such importance that they are taken for granted. I would though argue, that it is not by chance that they did use or articulate those concepts in their strategies, neither contextualized them on an articulated level as crucial perspectives. Many of them, I would argue, did mention emergent environmental issues – but not to the same level social and democratic issues etc.

So, the main impression is that Swedish higher education institution presents on this level a high

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28 for example Uppsala University, Gothenburg University, Örebro University and Lund University.
degree of homogeneity when it comes to strategically analysis and articulated strategies for the future.

Strategies of this kind can be understood as mainly outward and future oriented activities. To deepen the picture a second perspective will be presented, more inward and backward looking. The case is quality assurance systems and more particular, their features in the filed of teacher education, a strongly debated area that could call for elaborated and locally tuned models.

B: Applied quality assurance schemes in higher education institutions: the case of Swedish teacher education.

Above is presented indications on what appears to be cases of homogenization of strategically thinking in Swedish higher education. Now the attention is turned to a more inward looking activity in higher education, more precisely institutional systems for quality assurance. During last decades Swedish higher education system has been transformed by deregulation, decentralization and implementation of management by objectives, a shift toward a rule that has been termed “soft governance”.29 As an integral consequence we have witnessed a growing emphasis on quality assurance procedures of different kind. Some procedures has external initiators, some has internal roots.30

Quality assurance as an object of study can provide key information on institutional ideas on autonomy and societal role. But also it can be assumed that such systems displays not only institutional thinking in general and but also a more profound and critical view on how the institution in respect takes responsibility for programs and students learning as well as their ideas on what factors that produces risk in terms of low quality. Anchored in assumptions like those a case study of applied quality assurance systems Swedish teacher education was conducted in 2010.31 The result of that study will here be used as a case and the description below draws on that study.

For the analysis of local quality assurance system Åstrand (2012) used self-evaluation reports from 2007. The context for those reports was a national evaluation of teacher education and all institutions described at the time their quality assurance system. Swedish legislation does not demand any particular elements in such a system; it only states where responsibility rests. As a consequence, it is up to each institution to design a quality assurance system that according to their understanding of their role and critical factors, in the best way secure a desired level of quality and in addition, provide information about quality levels at hand.

From such a perspective a framework for analysis was established using following distinctions between quality assurance systems and elements:

- external and internal initiation;
- primary and secondary activities (i.e. focused on teaching and learning or quality assurance procedures as such);
- mandatory and voluntary;
- top-down processes and bottom-up processes;

30 Eurydice 2006. c.f. EUA 2009:18
31 Åstrand 2012
• different types of bodies in charge; and
• different profiles of evaluators.

A description of the diverse institutional landscape for teachers’ education was also provided as point of departure. Given fundamentally different conditions and developments among institutions it can be assumed that a) de facto risks for under achievement in terms of quality would be different and that b) institutional analysis of risks should be varied and thereby that c) the design of quality assurance approaches would follow the same variation. The study showed the opposite – all institutions appeared to apply one and the same approach to quality assurance.

Table 4: Quality assurance elements in use in Swedish teacher education institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality assurance elements</th>
<th>Institutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality assurance plan for teacher education</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course evaluations</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semester evaluations (subject)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programme evaluations</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collegial evaluations (internal)</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collegial evaluations (external)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal surveys</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of national/international information for benchmarking</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration with other institutions on quality assurance</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaires to students</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaires to alumna</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Self-evaluations reports from Swedish Teacher Education institutions submitted to The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (SNAHE) in 2007.

Without going into details one can note that larger institutions seems to differ from smaller institutions only in the sense that they tend to not use internal collegial evaluation and less benchmarking (national and international). The more interesting questions are though, why the differentiation is so low. How come, that those 21 institutions, different in profound respects, all display more or less the same pattern for one of their most important tasks? It is striking that we find both a surprisingly homogenous strategically thinking (first case above) and also a similarly homogenous pattern of applied quality assurance schemes. How can that be explained? We turn to institutional theory for explanations.
C: Institutional theory and isomorphic behavior among organizations

The current situation in higher education with what appears to be rather mainstreamed policy positions seems a bit odd. Let me expand a bit on this from another angle. In our concern regarding environmental problem a core assumption points to the idea that biodiversity is necessary for nature and future of mankind. Diversity is not only about preservation of genes and such stuff, but also about the capacity to fit into particular context and the ability to capitalize on rather unique conditions. It can be argued that diversity in the kind of ecosystem of higher education historically have been an advantage and that maybe can be the case in the future as well – and, hence diversity is on the higher education agenda.²²

Thus, institutions are policy wise encouraged to focus on what they are doing best and concentrate their resources, capacities and creativity along profiling strategies increasing their relative advantages. Partly, this aspect is included in the wider discourse on autonomy as it aims at creating institutional independence facilitating and making it possible for institutions to choice their own future direction. But when looking at the higher education landscape in Sweden today there are indications (as presented above) of something else, a kind of mainstreaming among higher education institutions and within. Instead of diversity and utilization of difference and relative advantages in an ecosystem like way institutions to some degree seems mainstreamed - the question here is how we can explain that.

Institutional theory have been used to understand industry and hospitals but also schools and educational phenomena and activities like textbooks, legal education and growth rate of duplicative programs in higher education.³³ Institutional theory is usually used to explain stability rather than change but recent development in the filed utilizes the concept of organizational isomorphism to also explain change.³⁴

It is argued, by DiMaggio & Powell (1991), that networked institutions in a kind of shared ecological system according to institutional theory, can display an isomorphic behavior, a “process of homogenization”.³⁵

Institutional theory in this respect draws upon Max Weber. For him, bureaucratization was caused mainly by:

- competition among capitalist firms in the marketplace;
- competition among state, increasing rulers’ need to control their staff and citizenry;

³⁵DiMaggio & Powell (1991), p66f
• bourgeois demand for equal protection under the law.  

Among those causes, the market and its inherent logics, is the most important according to Weber and DiMaggio & Powell argue that the causes of bureaucratization have changed along the achievements regarding the corporations and state, but process as such is continuing. They add that today:

structural change in organizational seems less and less driven by competition or by the need for efficiency, Instead we will contend, bureaucratization and other forms of organizational change occur as result of processes that make organization more similar without necessarily making them more efficient.

The focus of this study is on the variety (or its absence) of articulated ideas on the role of higher education institutions. Those documents are analyzed and compared to earlier and later published institutional strategies from the perspective of the theory on isomorphism. Institutional “scripts” as accreditation processes are an example of process related to legitimacy that can push such homogenization. In such instances and other with some shared characteristics it can be assumed that different kinds of isomorphic pressure are at play. Institutionalized isomorphism acts through three types mechanics or processes; coercive, normative or mimetic.

Coercive processes can according to theory be both formal and informal but are characterized by the fact that decision makers have the consequences of their decision-making on distance and that they to high degree apply a kind of one size fits all politics that assuming makes actors in the field less adaptive. Normative isomorphic pressure is assumed to derive from processes of professionalization and selective procedures within (for example recruitment patterns). In situations of unclear conditions and otherwise uncertainty and competition more mimetic strategies can come into play. In such situations organizations “tend to model themselves after similar organizations in their field that they perceive to be more legitimate or successful.”

Most likely the process also can be fueled by ministries (or other funders and policymakers) from above repetitive references to institutions that they perceive as more prestigious and successful.

So the question is why is mainstreaming a feature of Swedish higher education? The answer institutional theory provide is – because it pays of more than other strategies. DiMaggio & Powell argue to that those processes may be driven by situations of uncertainty and constraints and they makes the point that “efforts to deal rationally with uncertainty and constraint often lead, in the aggregate, to homogeneity in structure, culture and output.” Weber pointed to two phases of bureaucratization. The first one had its gain in increased efficiency and according to DiMaggio & Powell the continuation “provides legitimacy rather than improves performance.”

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37 DiMaggio & Powell (1983), p147
38 Rusch & Wilbur, (2007), p302
40 DiMaggio & Powell (1983), p152
41 DiMaggio & Powell (1983), p148
institutions that identify themselves as of less status than main actors in the field in respect etc. can be assumed to be more sensitive and act develop and signal features that resemblance more prestigious institutions.\footnote{Christensen & Eyring (2012) discuss in depth how schools of business globally have tried to model Harvard business school. The process seems to be of such profound impact that despite high cost and not that many obvious benefits it takes insights and leadership to diverge from that model.}

If so, that in a second stage of organizational change, isomorphic behavior is not related to efficiency gains but gains in terms of legitimacy, then question is from where is higher education institutions (including teacher education institutions) seeking legitimacy? It can argued that it is their wider, their prime and superior organization, the state (ministries) and if that it the case it indicates a low level of executed autonomy.

The application of institutional theory and the concept of isomorphism here support an attempt to understand why higher education institutions seems to become more homogenous instead of less (as indicated by the two cases above). Theory suggests that defining characteristics such as competition and insufficient clarity when it comes to institutional conditions of the Swedish ecosystem of higher education pushes this process. It raises questions also when it comes to institutional autonomy as it may indicate that institutions understand themselves in such weak positions that they cannot develop a more selective and individual approach.

But the situation appears to be more complicated. As a colleague among other colleagues one cannot avoid recalling numerous discussions in which a wide diversity of opinions have been voiced. That diversity contrasts the above described homogeneity. It can be argued that the homogeneity relates to the fact that colleagues, active in institutions have had to come to consensus in issues like strategies and quality assurance schemes and it is that consensus that is mirrored in the homogeneity. For sure, both collegial and more management oriented approaches, has certainly had impact but the argument here is that it is not self evident that colleagues in institutions that differs in almost all respects from one another, will end up in very similar decisions. Something happens in between peer-to-peer conversation and institutional policy and practices and it is argued here that institutional theory on isomorphism can shed light on this. But to take the issue a bit further, focus is now turned to opinions among leader and teachers on one of the missing themes in the institutional strategies, namely on issues relating to democracy and values.

3. Divergences among colleagues and within institutions

One of the larger and older branches of higher education studies is teacher education. Teacher education is particular interesting as it relates to the national school system and thereby to national politics and policy as well as public debate. In addition those programs contains elements of most traditional academic studies but they also include substantial studies of other kind, for example school placed studies. Teacher education programs has as such strong professional profiles and relates as such to the teaching profession and their strive for professionalization and support for their work and their ambitions to fulfill stipulated goals for schools. Taken together, teacher education program, its leaders and teachers can serve as a case when it comes to study opinions and ideas on democracy and values in higher education.
Teacher education has to a higher degree than many other areas of studies a prescribed approach to democracy and values. Those programs degree requirements more or less operationalize defined aspects of democracy and values education for school into learning outcomes for the students at those programs. Students has to study those areas and to pass school placed modules (practicum) they have to not only display required dispositions but also to in action, in their teaching in classes, take stance in such issues.

**Positions on democracy and values education in Swedish teacher education**

The section draws upon a set of interviews with leaders and teachers in higher education institutions in Sweden inquiring the purpose of higher education and how that informs ideas on the kind of impact studies are supposed to have on individual students. According to Shapiro, the “ultimate test, of course, is not what we teach, but what students learn and what they become.” While the two first studies presented in this paper focus on the institutional level, this section is geared toward understandings of key ideas on democracy and values in one of Swedish higher educations larger area of studies.

Have in mind that those close to 40 institutions in the study above has a predominant homogeneity at a top discourse level and that the leaders and teachers interviewed in this study are employees at those institutions. So what about asking a similar number of leaders and teachers on one of the tensed, meaning silenced, topics? On an individual level – what does the understanding of issues relating to democracy and values education in teacher education look like? This study focuses on how teacher educators and leaders of programs think about those things – or, if you wish, how they talk about them. The study was conducted in fall 2012 and is based upon a series of interviews at twelve higher education institutions.

When it comes to conceptual understanding and notions on educational aims differences among leaders and teachers within same program and institutions are at hand. There are educators that accentuate the importance of teachers holding a more formal knowledge on democracy and values. The argue that teachers need to know things like how government works, how citizens rights are founded, and on citizens participation in elections and participatory processes at work as employees etc. Also they argue that teachers should have a “familiarity with the political system and how it works together with what happens if it does not work properly.” These more formal and functional perspectives coexist with more normative perspectives (not necessarily mutually excluding).

Democracy can be understood in a variety of ways, among them functionalist and essentialist interpretations. A more functionalistic approach contains an emphasis on student participation in decision-making in. In other words, its about “to experience what it means to have influence and to participate in the educational processes and the shared work can be viewed as a way of dealing with democracy and a preparation for working life.”

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43 Shapiro, (2005), p94.
44 The section below follows closely Åstrand 2013A. The references given in numbers and letter represent individual informants. U and UC indicate that the informant is employed at a university or a university college. The numbers are assigned randomly. For details check Åstrand 2013A and Åstrand 2013C.
45 16U; 20UC; 18U; 23U; 10UC
46 16U
47 SU, Cf. 25UC
Among the notions of democracy, a Deweyian understanding was present, an understanding in which democracy as a concept is presented as a set of values, a way of living, and a desirable approach in interpersonal relation humans. Teachers (and teacher educators) have to “preach” and promote those values and approaches.\textsuperscript{48} Democracy is also described widely as “everything…it is about how we understand each other, it is about behavior and how we approach each other” and about “being responsive to each other and trying to take the other’s perspectives.”\textsuperscript{49} Such dispositions and values are understood as of key importance for society, for education, and for becoming a teacher. Democracy is also understood as a fragile condition that has to be nurtured otherwise it will disappear and is something to be reconquered on a daily basis.\textsuperscript{50} Normative notions of education can be held together with functional understandings, and the normative approach appears to exist in proximity with values education.

When it comes to purposes for values education, informants mirrored two rather polar interpretations. Some understanding the term (foundational values) to represent a fixed set of values (these are the foundational values) and another that focuses on values as something that needs to be defined in dialogue (which values? what constitute them?). These two positions relate to the different understanding of what kind of impact values education is supposed to have on student teachers; opening up critical reflection, empathetic competences to take another persons perspective and/or inculcation of certain values?

There are teacher educators that express a belief to have an obligation to teach and promote democracy as part of their responsibility as a civil servant active in a public business and regulated by law. An example is an teacher educator that informed that he prefer to challenge students to make up their minds on whether they are prepared to take on this obligation by saying that teachers have “a mission of indoctrination.”\textsuperscript{51} Such understanding of values education is likely to also include combinations of fixed understandings of values in respect and an ambition for inculcating them among teacher students, but also that the public role as a teacher “sets limits as to how much personal resonance there can be.”\textsuperscript{52}

Another position argues that the aim is not the inculcation of certain values but to teach students to become aware of their individual priorities as they have to with themselves.\textsuperscript{53} Accordingly, programs have “to strengthen the individual by providing opportunities for self analysis” as they have to “develop an enhanced self understanding.” In addition students needs come into a processes of reflections “upon who they are.”\textsuperscript{54}

In close proximity to this position is another that draws upon the same logic but in a more traditionally academic way. The main emphasis is to equip students with certain analytical and critical skills and competences that foster integrity and autonomy together with the capabilities to reflect upon a diversity of values and related problems rather than carrying certain values: “Teacher education’s first priority is to instill a critical reflective perspective on values education, not to transmit certain
values,” and is “to teach them to think and reflect, not to teach them to pity one another.” The different positions described above are more or less mutually exclusive, but in some cases they are linked aspects of a notion of teacher teacherhood. What’s of main interest here is to note how they differ from each other and what importance they are given.

Another important aspect is to what degree democracy and values education are held in high esteem. Democracy and values education are usually understood as important aspects of teacher education programs and of the process of becoming a teacher and for teaching as such, as one informant states, it is “our blood” and something you have to internalize as a teacher. Other key metaphors used that describe this is that these are foundation of society, a linchpin for schooling, the soul, and a nucleus in becoming a teacher and that these values should permeate teaching and learning. This indicates that democracy and values education on average are highly regarded but with partly different orientation towards the wider society, schooling, teacherhood, and becoming a teacher as for teacher education as such. But there are also divergences and divergent approaches in specific disciplinary traditions and aligned with those traditions there are a presence of different ideas regarding whether democracy and values education should be integrated into all subjects or not.

Epistemological differences seem also to be part of or underpinning differences in understandings of democracy and values education. This surface clearly when it comes to questions like, whether is possible to make a distinction between a knowledge side and a values side of the content. Some informants appear skeptical towards such possibilities and in addition there is also a voiced hesitancy towards hierarchical understandings. It is also emphasized that knowledge and values are interlinked and that agency and actions are key aspects what it is to know something. Others divide between values and knowledge and understand key content to for example consist of information on what constitutes a democracy includes things that students simply need to “know”, an approach that makes it possible to test students by fairly traditional means. For some, also among those who share this epistemological position, it is perceived as insufficient in teacher education to teach accordingly as democracy and values are not primarily about knowing but a readiness to take stance and act along democratic values.

Epistemological approaches connect to general notions on program objectives and informants understand this differently. For teacher education the main divergence has roots in questions of whether teacher education involves two parallel objectives, one more knowledge oriented and one more value and democracy oriented, and, if so, if they are in conflict or synergy.

Among interviewees there are expressions of teacher education having both those objectives. Some understand their role as a general assignment to promote democracy and certain values including a forming of individual students along those traits and that “all programs have a task to form students” in this respect. For others, this is not at all the task. One teacher educator had though developed a pedagogical approach in which teachers and students in the program take on roles as principals and
teachers in a school to have opportunities to inquiry into such approaches in education, as it was believed to be essential but outside his mandate.\footnote{19UC; 11UC}

The interdependency between objectives is another issue dividing opinions but for those who rejected the idea of two objectives there was, of course, no such concern. Others expressed different opportunities including acknowledging a conflict between those objectives either in principle or due to institutional tradition and internal affairs.\footnote{Cf. 4U} According to others, however, the two objectives are “not at all in conflict”, neither “independent from each other”.\footnote{10UC; 27U; 8U}

According to individual informants points of view, the field seem to carry an ambiguity between whether teaching toward acquisition of subject knowledge has priority over deliberation, inculcating and forming of dispositions, or even communicating democracy and values (or vice versa). Divergences on those issues appear related to different academic traditions connected to specific academic subjects and as such they impact on notions on what constitutes relevant content in a teacher education program and how that is to be understood. Such traditions are strong forces in Academia and well known. In fact they are so familiar to academics that the famous metaphorical description of Academia as “tribes and territories” is not only applicable but to my knowledge not even particular controversial.\footnote{Becher, T. & Trowler, P. R (1989), Academic Tribes and Territories, Open University Press}

What is of interest here is that the homogeneity displayed in higher education institutions strategic plans is not at all present at this level. Also, that, divergent traditions expressed on this level seems appropriate grounds for nuanced quality assurance schemes, but that is not supported by the study of such presented above.

Interviews with deans in teacher education and teacher educators reveal high levels of diversity on core understandings of teachers’ societal role, epistemology, higher education institutions role in democracy etc. There appears to exist a discrepancy between a top-level homogeneity visible in institutional analysis and strategies and personalized conceptual understanding of professional roles and institutional functions among individual faculties. One can ask – how it is to do research or to teach with a nagging feeling of discrepancy? Not just in details like “I rather teach that class than the I have been assigned to”-issues but more profound ones, like why are we here? What kind of impact is my teaching supposed to have on students? What is the most important contribution I can do as an employee at this institution?

4. Homogeneity and diversity in higher education - summary and reflections

It can be important to remind us about the difference between function and purpose. There can be purposes that not at all becomes realized, there can be functions that are not intentional etc.\footnote{Stevens, M. L. et al, (2008), Sieve, Incubator, Temple, Hub: Empirical and Theoretical Advances in the Sociology of Higher Education, Annual Review of Sociology, Vol 34} The above section deals with purpose and objectives and what is striking is that there is a wide variety of understandings and notions related to a core area (democracy and values) in one large higher
education program sector (teacher education). The diversity at this level stands out in contrast with the homogeneity expressed on institutional level.

There is an apparently strong view in teacher education institutions on a democratic role of the program in several senses. It seems to exist in conflict with general higher educations institutional strategies as they are outlined. It is not particularly challenging that such differences are at hand as the compared levels differs as the points of departure, in short, there is of course differences between institutional points of views and purposes with undergraduate studies. The point made here is that they most likely would gain from having a more explicit relation to each other and that there seems to be forces promoting mainstreaming behavior at top institutions highest levels.

Questions that surface due to this is concerns how long term discrepancies between institutional strategies (homogenous) and individual understandings (heterogeneous) will impact research and program studies in higher education and how will such affect the development of a renewed academia-society contract that takes into account the changed societal role of higher education in its mass format in democratic societies.

A recent study of the institutional purpose with undergraduate studies in U.S. shows a general emphasis on democratic purposes on institutional level. This emphasis is found to be in contrast with expressed reasons for students to undertake theses studies. Students mainly prioritize getting insights into disciplines and thereafter get at well-paid job. From a Swedish perspective and in the context of this paper the democratic emphasis in U.S. higher education institutions appears not to be in line with Swedish higher education according to above presented findings on institutional strategies. It is maybe not so surprising that U.S. students and institutions differ in ideas on purpose but what is interesting is that Swedish institutions argues in a similar utilitarian way as U.S. students.

Such an approach is not an unfamiliar tradition when it comes to Swedish higher education. An analysis of articulated purposes for higher education as well as ideas on the value of investments in higher education shows a strong continuity of utilitarian approaches in the emphasis of higher educations impact on economic growth.

Table 5: Swedish higher education, purposes articulated by government 1976 - 2014

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main political profile</td>
<td>Center</td>
<td>Socialdem.</td>
<td>Conserv.</td>
<td>Socialdem.</td>
<td>Conserv.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Socio-cultural development</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth/ Economic development</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X (sust.dev.)</td>
<td>X (sust.dev.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitiveness/competition</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prosperity/ welfare</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional preparation of labor force</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal development</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Knowledge/competence</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bildung/critical thinking</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Democracy, equity, values</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Racism, xenophobia</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>Future/Future problems</td>
<td>X</td>
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</table>


As can be noted, there are also articulated ideas on the importance of higher education for democracy and values but as concluded above, institutional strategies does not usually put that argument in the forefront, rather they prioritize more growth related analyses and ideas in their strategies.

This paper draws mainly upon two main studies on institutional strategies and thinking about higher educations societal role among academic leaders. In addition has results from a prior study on quality assurance schemes on institutional level and a brief overview of governmental arguments for resource allocation into higher education been provided. Taken together those studies roughly cover three levels, national, institutional and individual. They are not fully compatible but they add important parts that are possible to put in relation to each other. The theme of continuity and change cannot in empirical sense be supported by those studies.
Above has been described how higher education institutions seem to voice current analysis and ideas for the future in a striking homogenous manner. Also it is found indications on mainstreaming practices in design of quality assurance models. Institutional theory on isomorphic behavior suggests that this is a typical outcome of the kind of ecosystem in which higher education operates and that this is likely to continue, disregarding increased inefficiency but in search for increased legitimacy. According to DiMaggio & Powell we can understand this as a mimetic “process of homogenization”.\footnote{DiMaggio & Powell (1991), p61f}

This homogenization is not at all visible on individual level. The second main inquiry presented above deals with notions on democracy and values education and finds higher degree of diversity in ideas concerning this area and objectives for professional preparation.

It appears as if higher education institutions experience difficulties in expressing profiled and individual strategies anchored in both local and global analyses. In addition it is a remarkable “sound of silence” when it comes to institutional understandings of its role as a mass education institution in a democratic society. For the future it seem imperative that higher education institution acknowledge that they have important roles and that they make their interpretation articulated and develop strategies for taking identified responsibility.


This kind debate is not only a U.S. phenomena. During 2013 the levels of learning in higher education have been debated at a prominent Swedish daily newspaper.\footnote{Svenska Dagbladet. Guess which one of the articles that was written by the university chancellor, responsible for the national quality inspection of higher education. C.f DN-debatt 130404} A short recollection of the those articles is illustrative:

\begin{itemize}
\item Quality review is of low quality (130923),
\item Is it too lazy days as a student in higher education? (131121),
\item Higher education has acute problems (131123),
\item Students have to take personal responsibility for learning (131126) and
\item Many programs has too little impact on students (131128)
\end{itemize}

The point made here is not on the level of learning but rather that society should worry about what kind of learning that is or is not going on in HE and what impact this has on students in a wider
perspective. Drawing on Biesta, and his emphasis on the idea that studies have three fold function (qualification, socialization and subjectification) and that they are interlinked in such a way that an intervention in qualification also impacts the other two and vice versa. This observations has its relevance here as higher education seems to have an awareness about it qualification function and looks for advancement in that respect omitting how that affect the other functions and how that relates to issues on identity, democracy etc.

Higher education institutions have by tradition had an autonomous role and researchers are seldom voiceless when the academic freedom is questioned and during the last decade a debate on institutional autonomy resulted in an increased institutional independence. Despite this – institutional analysis seems very much aligned to each other, holding similar opinions, not indicating a particular independent thinking about higher educations societal role for democracy. If institutional processes of homogenization continue society maybe at risk of having a decreasing number of alternative ideas on the table when it comes to understanding of key societal challenges. If the discrepancy between a homogenous top level outward communication and collegial diverse notions on key issues increases institutions reflective capacity can be at risk as well. Taken together, much calls for rethinking of what the ecosystem of higher education have to look like to secure the necessary biodiversity in the system and what conditions in higher education that is needed for securing diversity in terms of both continuity and change within institutions. In relation to the current national debate on autonomy in higher education it can be translated into an argument for a general shift in autonomy policy from only procedural autonomy to substantive autonomy.

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