Not just another evaluation

A comparative study of four educational quality projects at Swedish universities

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Abstract

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In this study, four recent self-initiated educational quality projects at Swedish universities are compared and analysed. The aim is to contribute to an increased understanding of quality management in contemporary higher education.

The projects are found to be built on similar rationales linked to accountability, reputation building and strategic management, and on similar ambitions regarding raising the status of education. Although there are links to the shared external policy context, the projects differ considerably in their actual design and implementation. This is interpreted as an active adaptation to the unique internal academic norms and cultures that exist in each university.

Presentation

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Introduction

In the 2009-2012 period, four Swedish universities: Lund University, the University of Gothenburg, Uppsala University and KTH Royal Institute of Technology, undertook university wide projects aimed at enhancing the quality of education and stimulating internal quality culture. They each did so by their own initiative, respective university management teams playing the instigating role.

In this paper¹, the four projects are compared and analysed. Similarities and differences with regard to rationale, aim, scope, stakeholders, methodology and outcome are identified and contextualised.

The projects are not just regarded as four individual cases interesting in their own right. They are also seen to mirror some of the core strategic dilemmas faced by contemporary universities - in Sweden and beyond. By extension, the paper aims to contribute to an increased understanding of quality management in higher education.

In particular, the paper focuses on the interplay between internal and external factors that have a bearing on quality management. More specifically, the analysis is driven by the following research question:

How do university governed quality processes handle the tension between internal academic norms and external state and society driven demands in the Swedish university system?

Given this, the paper starts out by outlining the Swedish policy context and the theoretical approach taken. A brief description of the projects is followed by an account of the methodology used. Based on the findings on similarities and differences, the paper concludes by discussing how the four universities, in their respective projects, have found ways of handling the challenges.

Background

The external policy context

Because the universities discussed in this paper are public authorities, the national policy context forms an important backdrop to the four projects.

In the last two decades, the general policy drive has been towards new public management (NPM). Three core components of NPM (Ferlie et al. 2008) can be distinguished:

Firstly, accountability issues are in focus, as the Swedish state has established a range of performance monitoring measures such as audits, quantitative indicators and evaluation. Ever greater importance is attached to the results achieved by the sector.

A recent manifestation of this is the 2011-2014 national quality assurance system for higher education. This is a comprehensive evaluation scheme focused on output factors: the assessment of students' learning outcomes, and students' final theses in particular. Accountability is the underlying principle: universities are to provide evidence that students meet the intended outcomes (Ministry of Education and Research 2009a). This system is a break with earlier quality assurance schemes that were more enhancement orientated and took input and processes factors into account.

Secondly, there is increased emphasis on markets. As seen elsewhere, this is an agenda driven by the state in response to globalisation. An efficient university sector is viewed as a prerequisite for growth in a modern, knowledge based economy. In order to achieve optimal results – in student learning as well as in knowledge production - universities are to be ‘socially embedded’ rather than isolated. Therefore there is a growing expectation that universities interact with the surrounding community including business. This has resulted in the blurring of boundaries, and generally, an increased exposure to external stakeholders (Olssen & Peters 2005).

An intensified quest for resources is part of this market logic. Such resources may be tangible, such as research funding or student recruitment, or symbolic, such as international reputation. Globalisation has made the reputation race ever more important (van Vught 2008).

Thirdly, more attention is given to the role of university management. Current national policies come with the explicit expectation that universities take a more active, self-governing role which in turn is believed to lead to increased efficiency and improved results. This is in line with international developments, calling for universities to change in the direction of becoming strategic actors (Gumport 2000; Ramirez 2010) and to shoulder the responsibility for input factors such as teaching qualifications and educational practices (European Commission 2013).

The Swedish autonomy reform of 2011 illustrates this point. It was implemented via legislative change and designed to increase the freedom for higher education institutions with regard to their internal decision-making and organisation, academic posts, study regulation and financial administration (Ministry of Education and Research 2009b).

It was in this context that the four universities launched the projects that are the theme of this paper.

Theoretical approach

In this paper, it is argued that the four projects are best understood using a theoretical approach that acknowledges university-internal characteristics as well as external influence. This is in line with recent empirical research (cf. Ramirez & Christensen 2013), indicating that change processes are dynamic: they do not occur automatically and instrumentally, but universities are not immune to external input either (Gornitzka 1999).

Traditional institutional theory can contribute by highlighting the importance of internal culture, norms and values. Here, the internal history is seen to shape the future of the organisation; it is ‘path dependent’. In the case of the university sector, it has been argued that if the externally imposed logic differs from internal professional academic norms, resistance can be expected. This in turn may halt or postpone change (Weick 1976). Similarly, from a quality management perspective, Harvey & Stensaker (2008) refer to *reproductive quality cultures*, “focused on reproducing the status quo, manipulating the situation to minimise the impact of external factors as far as possible” (Harvey & Stensaker 2008, p. 437).

However, according to new institutional theory, there is mounting empirical evidence that organisations can, and do, respond to their external context:

Widely circulated ideas have proved to result in or contribute to changes in individual organizations’ identities, in field transformations and in more general institutional changes. (Sahlin & Wedlin 2008, p. 220).

In new institutional theory, imitation is a powerful source of change. In this connection, the concept of ‘isomorphism’, raised by DiMaggio & Powell (1983), is relevant. Isomorphism is the tendency for organisations to imitate each other, given similar circumstances.

This does not necessarily mean that external ideas and fashions are absorbed straight into the organisation. New institutional theory does not view change as a linear process but rather as one in which external demands are actively ‘translated’ or ‘edited’ by internal key actors, and given a local meaning (Czarniawska & Jorges 1996; Sahlin & Wedlin 2008). In the context of quality management in higher education, this can be a reflection of a *regenerative quality culture* “focused on internal developments, albeit fully aware of the external context and expectations” (Harvey & Stensaker 2008, p. 437).

If this holds true, organisations with different internal structures, traditions and stakeholders will adopt different strategies – despite similar external pressures. This is a hypothesis which is tested on the four universities in this paper.

The four projects in brief

The following is a brief overview of the four projects, meant to pave the way for the comparative analysis. For a more in-depth description of each project, respective university’s website can be consulted.

In 2009, Lund University initiated the Education Quality (*EQ11*) project, aimed at enhancing the quality of education. EQ11 focused on the faculty level. An initial phase of the project was dedicated to gaining internal agreement on the project method, which emphasised long-term quality development. Faculties then completed self-reflections based on quality indicators of which some were predefined (outcomes, alignment, leadership/management, scholarship, internationalisation, cross-boundary activities and innovation) and some were the choice of the respective faculty. EQ11 encapsulated a number of working groups covering themes such as doctoral education; and publications in teaching and learning. The project also linked up with a number of other on-going development projects. Further, an international group of external advisors was engaged. The advisors visited Lund in May 2011 and provided faculty-specific as well as university wide feedback and recommendations. (<http://www5.lu.se/staff-pages/teaching/education-quality-2011>)

At the University of Gothenburg, preparations for the Better Learning in University Education project (*BLUE*) started in 2010. Most of the activities were then carried out in 2011. The main aim of BLUE was to provide an overview of quality and quality development work at programme level. For each study programme, a report was compiled using a self-assessment tool covering quantitative data as well as qualitative analysis of core issues such as programme design, student recruitment and teacher competence. Responsibility for the self-assessment was delegated to the faculties, who also saw to it that external audits were undertaken on the basis of the programme reports. The faculties had some freedom to organise these audits according to their preferences, which meant that audit group compositions and work methods varied from one faculty to another. Finally, faculties were asked to deliver a report to the central project management, summarising lessons learned and steps ahead. (<http://www.gu.se/omuniversitetet/vision/kvalitetsarbete/blue11>)

At Uppsala University, the Creative Educational Development project (*CrED*) was undertaken in the 2010-2012 period. The aims of the project were to improve the quality of education and to stimulate cross-disciplinary interaction and sharing of best practice. As part of the CrED project, a series of seminars targeting teachers, study coordinators and students were held, and a range of development projects and special interest groups were supported. Some prioritised themes for those activities were chosen by the university (boundary-spanning courses/programmes and research-teaching linkages) and some by faculties and disciplinary domains (teaching, goals and examinations, learning environment, teacher competence, evaluation, etc.). CrED was designed to form part of the implementation, and upcoming revision, of the university’s teaching and learning guidelines from 2008. An international panel was also engaged to comment on CrED and the way forward. The panel visited Uppsala University on two occasions, in 2011 and 2012 respectively. (http://uadm.uu.se/Planeringsavdelningen/Enheten_for_kvalitet_och_utvardering/KrUUt)

The only single-faculty university covered in this study, KTH Royal Institute of Technology undertook an Education Assessment Exercise (EAE) in 2011. The main aim of the project was quality enhancement by facilitating discussion and analysis within an evaluation format. Another purpose of the EAE was to serve as preparation for the national evaluation of engineering and technology education scheduled to be undertaken in 2012. All KTH study programmes were included in the exercise, which comprised a three month self-evaluation phase as well as a review by an international panel of assessors. In the EAE, focus lay partly on output factors such as students' final theses, and partly on input factors such as teacher competence and teaching and learning approaches. The panel of assessors visited KTH in August 2011, giving feedback to programme, school and central management levels. (<http://intra.kth.se/kth-informerar/kvalitetsarbete/eae2011>; KTH 2012)

Methodology

Empirically, this paper is based on documentary studies and interviews. Documents pertaining to the four projects include: project plans, presentations, minutes of meetings, thematic reports, project summaries, external advisors' reports and follow-up documents. When relevant, general strategic documents, such as university development plans, quality assurance policies and mission statements, have also been analysed. The majority of the documents are accessible from respective university's website.

In all, 27 interviews with a total of 35 key informants were undertaken during the spring of 2013. To match the aim of the study, informants were primarily selected from senior university management (faculty as well as central management), project management and external advisory groups. Interviews followed a semi-structured format with essential topics identified in advance (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009). Accommodating the wishes of some informants, a small number of interviews were conducted in a group format. The majority of interviews were conducted by the main author. However, interviews at KTH were conducted by co-authors so as to avoid 'home interviews'. Following transcription, interviews were thematically coded, categorised and analysed using NVivo.

Findings

Below follows a comparative analysis of the four projects with regard to rationale, aim, scope, stakeholders, methodology and outcome. Similarities and differences are identified, based on interview and documentary data. The empirical findings in turn lead up to a concluding discussion on how the universities have handled the tension between internal academic norms and external state and society driven demands.

Similarities

In terms of timing, aim and scope, similarities between the four projects are striking. All projects were initiated and completed in approximately the same time period, activities culminating in 2011. In all four cases, the main aim was quality enhancement rather than quality control. Thus, the projects were meant to act as vehicles for long-term change. Further, all projects had a comprehensive, university wide scope, involving a considerable number of academic as well as administrative staff. They were all instigated by university management but aspired to broad participation. All four projects were justified in similar ways; using rationales that can be directly linked to the external policy context described above.

The general drive toward accountability and evaluation formed a background to all projects, as did the emphasised role of university management in strategic change. All four universities had already begun to tackle this issue strategically. In fact, the education projects had all been preceded by self-initiated assessment exercises in the area of research: Research Quality Assurance for the Future

(RQ08) at Lund University in 2008; Research evaluation for development of research (RED10) at the University of Gothenburg in 2010; Quality and Renewal (KoF) at Uppsala University in 2007 and 2011; and Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) at KTH in 2008 and 2012. The pairing of project names (RQ08-EQ11, RED10-BLUE11, KoF-CrED, RAE-EAE) marks their relationship.

The research evaluations played important roles in the early stages of the education projects, both as inspiration and deterrent. On the one hand, the research evaluations acted as driving forces: the argument being that, research had already received a lot of attention and hence time had come to highlight education. This was seen as a testament to the symbolism attached to projects of this type. Quality management was consciously used as a 'lever' in the attempt to upgrade teaching and learning (Higher Education Academy 2009). By initiating sister projects in education, university management would signal that 'it is as important as research'. This type of argument was put forward e.g. by the student organisations at Lund University and by the Faculty Council at KTH, who were instrumental to the respective projects.

On the other hand, experiences from the research evaluations were not all positive. They had consumed a lot of time and energy, which meant that mobilising the 'evaluation fatigued' academic community for yet another project would be difficult. They had also caused methodological debate and, at times, ideologically motivated resistance. These negative connotations were important reference points in the framing of all four education projects. Arguing the need to learn from past experience, and recognising that education is less output orientated than research, university management teams decided that the methodology used in the research projects would not be replicated. The education projects would focus on development strategies for the future rather than on the evaluation of past performance. Making this distinction was important in all four cases, particularly at Lund University and Uppsala University.

The national quality assurance system for higher education also played a part in all four projects. This too was a double-edged discussion. On the one hand, it was acknowledged that the experience of a self-initiated project could be valuable when the time came for external evaluation. On the other hand, there was an awareness of the risk of ever deeper evaluation fatigue. It was only in the case of KTH - the single-faculty university - that the internal project could be timed so as not to collide with the external evaluations but rather support the preparations for the external evaluations. At multi-faculty universities, one part of the organisation or another was always affected by external evaluation. The internal projects therefore had to be rolled out regardless of the national system, while also trying to avoid overlaps and benefit from synergies.

Perhaps more importantly, the limitations of the national quality assurance system were discussed in relation to all four projects. Because of the rather instrumental and output orientated approach of the external system, it was felt that the internal projects had to be "something different" – and implicitly, something better, and more enhancement focused. University management teams had a clear understanding of the political signal: there was to be a division of labour in the sector in which universities themselves carry the responsibility for the planning and running of higher education, and are then held accountable to the state for their results.

Another commonality was the emphasis on international reputation building. In addition to being research intense, all four universities in this study are internationally orientated. This was part of the rationale behind the projects and played an important role throughout. Via international networks such as LERU, Matariki, Universitas 21 and CLUSTER, peer universities in other parts of Europe and in the USA were sources of inspiration to the projects. They were also important recruitment grounds for external advisors and assessors. The role of the externals, in turn, was not only to provide valuable advice and to give the projects additional internal clout. By extension, it was also to verify the 'alliance' of the university with its international community and to spread the word about the project. Taking good care of the advisors and making their site visits a worthwhile learning experience was therefore seen as a priority.

To some extent, the same holds true in the national context, where there were continuous exchanges between Lund University, the University of Gothenburg and Uppsala University in particular. As part of a regular three-party network, the sharing of updates and information as well as the participation in one another's projects, were enabled. However, the other Swedish projects were not regarded as role models but rather as separate endeavours undertaken independently of one's own.

A further similarity between the projects was the ambition to link them to existing internal policy documents and on-going management processes. In the case of the University of Gothenburg, the BLUE project was to inform upcoming dialogues between central management and the faculties regarding future priorities, programme supply and resource allocation. A similar agreement applied at KTH. At Uppsala University, the project was supposed to contribute to the implementation of a policy document: the teaching and learning guidelines. In all cases, it was an explicit and repeated ambition of the university management teams to place the projects within an operational logic. They were described as part of a continuum of undertakings. For example, at KTH a narrative was presented, beginning with the formulation of a new quality policy in 2010, continuing onto the EAE project in 2011 and followed by the national evaluation in 2012.

Differences

Despite the many similarities, the four projects also had major differences when it came to methodology and actual implementation. A principal dividing-line can be identified between the projects at Lund University and Uppsala University on the one hand, and the projects at the University of Gothenburg and KTH on the other hand. While the two former were more integrated into, and less distinguishable from, regular development activities, the two latter had more clear-cut project formats where curricular reviews were expected to be performed throughout the universities according to an advised format.

The two former also begun with longer initiation phases - akin to internal negotiation - in which methodologies were agreed. In those cases, a step-wise approach was deemed necessary in order to get internal stakeholders, including the most critical academic groupings, on board. There was heterogeneity in the response to the projects mirroring the multi-faculty structure. This meant that decisions on project design could not be rushed, but stakeholders had to be convinced that the projects were worthwhile.

At Uppsala University, the teaching and learning guidelines had an essential role in gaining acceptance for CrED:

Using the teaching and learning guidelines as a base was a big advantage to CrED. It had already been widely negotiated and we knew that there was broad support for it.

At Lund University, getting the message across that EQ11 would not replicate the RQ08 methodology was important. Here, the use of language was crucial. It was stressed at all times that EQ11 was not an evaluation. As described on the website:

EQ11 should be prospective and supportive and constitute a central part of Lund University's own long-term quality development work, rather than being another evaluation.

Consequently, such terms as 'advisor' and 'self-reflection' were carefully chosen in lieu of 'assessor' and 'self-evaluation'.

At the two latter universities, there was dialogue too, but not as lengthy. Language linked to concepts such as accountability, reputation-building and strengthened management systems caused less of a

debate. At KTH, the term 'evaluation' was used throughout, along with references to international best practice in this regard.

At the University of Gothenburg, the term 'audit' was preferred. By using this term, the BLUE project was related to the faculty audits that are recurring elements of the regular quality assurance system at the University of Gothenburg. In this study, BLUE stands out as the only project where the external assessment was decentralised to faculty/middle management level. In the other cases, the external input was more tightly coordinated at central level.

The four projects also differed in their approaches to stakeholders and participation. All four aspired to broad participation but targeted different groups within the universities. At Lund University, the faculties were the prime agents. This was partly the case at the University of Gothenburg as well, albeit combined with a programme focus similar to that of KTH. At Uppsala University, domains and faculties did deliver summary reports to the international panel. However, the main target group throughout the project was anyone from the academic or student communities interested in attending open seminars and conducting quality projects.

Finally, the projects also differed with regard to how the outcome was presented. While all four projects were condensed into final reports and recommendations, the content and purpose of these varied.

The enhancement themes were also different depending on local circumstances and priorities. To name but a few examples: One of the (several) core issues that was discussed at length at Uppsala University was teaching-research links. This was emphasised at Lund University too while at KTH, this did not surface in strategic discussions. At the University of Gothenburg the issue of university cohesion was important, and followed naturally from the aim of BLUE, which was to get an overview of programme quality. At Lund University, doctoral education was identified as a key issue, while at KTH this was not part of the project scope at all, and so on.

External panel reports were one concrete outcome of the projects, but the main emphasis was on continuous organisational learning and quality enhancement. This process took place at different levels depending on how the project was designed.

Concluding discussion

Educational quality has many champions at different levels within the university sector, who on an everyday basis work for the continuous improvement of courses and study programmes. The projects discussed in this paper were quality initiatives of a different kind. They were initiated and endorsed by university management teams who viewed them as strategic undertakings for the betterment of the university as a whole. They were used to develop, communicate and implement common university policies and guidelines. They were also used to inform decision-making on resource allocation and other strategic priorities and they were presented to external audiences as illustrations of the university's proactive approach to educational quality. Not least, they were attempts to create a better balance between teaching and learning and research respectively, given that all four universities are research intensive.

All four projects share these characteristics, and it is fair to say that they illustrate increased strategic actorship on the part of university management teams. This is in line with policy developments in Sweden and beyond. This is not to infer that the educational quality projects were the first, or most drastic, illustrations of this kind. The preceding research evaluations may well have played a more ground-breaking role, and if so, the education projects followed a path already partly trodden. It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve deeper into this issue.

There are similarities between the projects which can be directly linked to the shared external policy context. The drive towards accountability - be it by audit, evaluation or other measures - is evident, as is the importance of reputation building. Not only were the projects 'branded' through their names, they were also 'marketed' within the international peer community. The projects also made more or less explicit reference to national political initiatives, and tried to juggle the demands of the autonomy reform and the new national quality assurance system.

Even though all four universities thereby showed responsiveness to and awareness of the external context, this was not an instrumental process. The complexities became evident early in the design and implementation stages. All universities had to face difficult methodological dilemmas: e.g. striking the right balance between enhancement and control, and between detail and overview. University management teams were highly aware that project methods could not be rubberstamped but that they had to be anchored in the local culture. In this they had to listen to and negotiate with internal stakeholders including critics.

As a consequence, the projects developed in different directions in reflection of internal values and norms. Notably at none of the universities was there unreserved support of all new public management ideals. The problem of evaluation fatigue was acknowledged by many. Only minor importance was given to quantitative data; rather, the emphasis in all four projects was on qualitative peer review. In this sense, the project designs redefined rather than copied NPM.

This is an important point which means that this study concurs with new institutional theory in underscoring the importance of a local translation and adaptation of external ideas.

The findings also indicate that the four projects were based on regenerative rather than reproductive quality culture ideals (Harvey & Stensaker 2008). In other words: external factors were acknowledged rather than resisted. But the internal quality cultures interpreted those external demands and made them 'their own'.

Returning to the overall research question raised in the introduction:

University governed quality processes take external state and society driven demands into account, but they actively mould them into an internally accepted format.

The element of strategic choice is in fact important to university self-images. On the surface, the projects may be similar and interconnected in a way which would point to isomorphism. This, however, is downplayed. Instead, each university presents its own narrative. In the age of autonomy, university management wants to put forward a unique project, and "not just another evaluation".

¹ This paper is one of the results of a joint initiative, aimed at a) contributing to the wider policy debate on quality management in higher education; and b) encouraging organisational learning and informing future strategies at the four universities. The initiative has been coordinated by Sara Karlsson, with main responsibility for data collection, analysis and authorship, together with a project team consisting of Karin Fogelberg (University of Gothenburg), Stefan Lindgren (Lund University), Åsa Kettis (Uppsala University) and Lars Geschwind (KTH). The group also had valuable input from additional colleagues at the four universities. Interviews have been conducted by Sara Karlsson, Lars Geschwind, Åsa Kettis, Karin Fogelberg and Malin Östling. All listed authors have made significant contributions to project design, data collection and analysis, as well as the compilation of this paper. The final version of the paper has been agreed by all authors.

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