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Quality in context – embedding improvement

Paper proposal form

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Boström has on a number of occasions participated in and chaired institutional reviews in Sweden and other countries.

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Åsa Kettis is Head of the Division for Quality Enhancement at Uppsala University, and Associate Professor in Social Pharmacy. The Division supports the development and the implementation of university-wide policies for QA and QE at UU - including institution-led reviews of learning, teaching, and research - and offers courses and pedagogical consulting services to teachers (including e-learning).



In 2010-2014 she was a member of the Expert Team on Quality appointed by the Association of Swedish Higher Education (SUHF). In that capacity she participated in drafting SUHF's position concerning the national quality system for higher education.

Kettis has participated in institutional reviews in Sweden and other countries, including Scotland, Denmark and Ireland.

(If there are several authors, please copy and fill in the fields for each author and indicate who will be responsible for presenting the paper at the Forum.)

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Proposal

Title: Introducing a new national QA system in Sweden. A discussion on opportunities and challenges

Abstract (150 words max):

Over the last decades higher education in Sweden has been subject to a number of different national QA systems. Now and then, they have been met with criticism. In 2012, the Swedish Association of Higher Education (SUHF) decided to take a constructive and long term position on the issue. The position proved to be successful, and now a new national system is being launched. This paper is about the opportunities and challenges that this new system brings, not least because the political decision about the system means that parts of the old system will be fused into the new system – which may cause unwanted effects.

The paper is based on: Policy

Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? If yes, give details. No

Text of paper (3000 words max):

Background

From time to time Sweden's different national systems for quality assurance (QA) of higher education have been subject to heated debates and criticism. The last system (2011-2014) made no exception. It was based on review of study programmes/subjects using the quality of students' degree projects/final thesis as the main quality indicator. The system was deemed incompatible with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and, in consequence, the Swedish quality assurance agency's ENQA membership was questioned in 2012.¹ Thus, Sweden was in a

¹ <http://docplayer.net/8681754-Swedish-national-agency-for-higher-education-review-of-enqa-membership.html>



strong need of a sustainable and internationally accepted national quality system. In 2012, the Swedish Association of Higher Education (SUHF), i.e. the Swedish rectors' conference, commissioned its Expert Group on Quality to proactively propose a long-term position regarding the required characteristics of such a system. The proposal made was adopted by the General Assembly of SUHF in October 2013.

A national quality system consists of different processes for QA and further development of the quality of education. Many of these processes are implemented at the individual higher education institutions (HEIs). The system also includes the activities of the national QA agency. *A core principle in the position adopted by SUHF was that the different parts of the total system must be designed in accordance with each other for the system to function optimally.* The responsibility of the HEIs should be to develop and control the quality of their study programmes/subjects, and the role of the Agency (the Swedish Higher Education Agency) should be to review the functionality of the HEIs' own QA systems.

Following the pronouncement made by SUHF, the Swedish government appointed an investigator to propose a new national quality system. The proposal made was largely in line with the position of SUHF.² There was however one big difference. SUHF proposed that the HEIs should be given the opportunity to qualify for the responsibility to perform their own study programme/subject reviews (with external reviewers) through accreditation by the Agency. Only the reviews of study programmes/subjects at non-accredited HEIs should be performed by the Agency. The proposal of the investigator was instead that *all* HEIs should have the same responsibility in terms of QA, without prior accreditation. The HEIs would however not be specifically required to conduct study programme/subject reviews with external reviewers - they could use other means of QA equally well. The investigator also proposed that the Agency should be restrictive in carrying out study programmes/subjects reviews, and only do so when warranted, i.e. a risk-based approach was suggested. In conformity with the former system, failure to pass would lead to the withdrawal of degree awarding powers.

Since the old system was politically regulated in detail (a fact that ENQA criticized), the new system had to pass through the national political institutions. This time, the government and the parliament withdrew from regulating details. In a report to the parliament, the government outlined its views on how the general framework for the new national QA system should be designed. The parliament noted these views, but did not take a decision about the framework as such. The government later formed the assignment to the Agency based on the outlined framework.

However, the framework did not fully follow the investigator's proposal. Instead, it stated that Agency-led reviews of study programs/subjects should be a prioritized part of the national system and that the government itself from time to time could decide that study programs/subjects of special interest should be reviewed by the Agency. This means that the

² <http://www.uka.se/nyheter/2014-11-05-preliminart-forslag-pa-nytt-utvarderingssystem.html>



distinction between the different actor's roles and responsibilities that SUHF suggested is not as clear in the new framework.

Alongside the primary principle of accordance between the different parts of the national quality system, the proposal made by the rectors' conference, SUHF, rests on a few other basic principles. 1) The system should be based on a strong sense of *ownership and responsibility* on the part of the individual HEIs, as this implies strong incentives for them to act proactively rather than reactively. Proactivity leads to a more systematic and continuous development than a reactive approach. 2) The system should also be both *control and enhancement oriented*. It is not enough for a study programme/subject to meet minimum standards. Instead, there should also be a focus on the development potential at all levels. 3) Finally, the evaluation system should allow for *diversification* of the total education opportunities offered. Diversification opportunities serve to take advantage of local creativity and competence.

As a fourth principle it was also stated that the system must have *international legitimacy* to avoid interference with Swedish students' opportunities to study and work abroad – and for Swedish study programmes/subjects to be attractive to foreign students. A quality system gains legitimacy within EHEA by complying with ESG. The way ESG is designed, the three principles discussed above are in practice also underpinning the fourth principle of international legitimacy. And the other way around, that the system complies with ESG means that the first three principles are met.

In the rest of this paper we will discuss opportunities and challenges of the new Swedish system that is now being introduced in the light of the principles above.

Ownership and responsibility

There is no doubt that a culture of ownership and responsibility is highly prevalent in the ongoing preparatory phase of the new system. Most HEIs have started to develop their systems for QA and quality enhancement (QE) in an engaged and inventive way - as a matter of fact these activities started even before the new framework was introduced by the government. The expected change has also sparked increased collaboration and sharing of ideas between HEIs, given that they all simultaneously face the same undertaking. Since the details of the national QA system is not yet set, there has been much room for proactivity and apt variation. This has led to different models for strengthened QA emerging at different HEIs, closely aligned to their respective ethos and preconditions. Thus, the new self-responsibility and increased ownership has so far resulted in an enriching multiplicity of approaches.

This situation may well be extrapolated in to the future, but there are some potential threats to the upholding of it. These include: 1) the politicians and/or the Swedish Higher Education Authority may undermine the HEIs' ownership and possibilities to assume responsibility by



interfering at a too detailed level, 2) the HEIs themselves may fail in fully taking charge of their new possibilities, and/or responsibilities, or turn out to lack in perseverance in spite of their initial enthusiasm.

Because of political negotiations, Agency-led reviews of study programmes/subjects are to remain as a prioritized component in the new national system. As already pointed out above, this fact is at odds with SUHF's holistic view, where the different parts of the total system must be designed in accordance with each other for the system to function optimally. Given the new framework, the Agency *might* come to use the study programme/subject review tool quite widely. It is already known that it will be used for a selection of study programmes/subjects, with the aim to provide a national overview when the Agency, or the government, identifies such a need. The component will also be used in a risk-based manner. If an institutional review has indicated that an HEI's internal system for QA is substandard, or if there are signals about problems with regard to individual study programmes/subjects, the Agency may initiate such a review.

Although this is legitimate and reasonable in theory, it may undermine the HEIs' internal systems for QA (and QE). It makes the HEIs' planning more difficult and may cause redundancy. Also, the bare awareness of that the Agency *may* conduct study programme/subject reviews poses a considerable risk for 'game playing'. The HEIs may find it better to be safe than sorry, and hence anxiously copy the design and the criteria of Agency-led study programme/subject reviews for the reviews they commission themselves. The Agency-led study programme/subject reviews then becomes the implicit norm. This may suffocate the HEIs' creativity and diminish their sense of ownership, while also leading to unwanted uniformity. The HEIs may handle the situation in different ways. They may, for example, try to use both their own criteria and the Agency's criteria, which may lead to double standards.

In order to avoid this scenario completely, the Agency-led study programme/subject review component would have to be removed from the system, and the Agency would have to refrain from using too detailed criteria in institutional reviews. Alternatively, the HEIs will have to resist their urge to be reactive, and design their internal QA systems (including their subject reviews) their own way, with the Swedish Higher Education Act and ESG as the only backdrop. The cautiousness regarding criteria also applies to different organisational levels inside the HEIs, i.e. too detailed criteria may unduly limit reviews, and fetter external peer reviewers in their evaluation of quality.

In this context it should be pointed out that the Agency has been very open and inclusive towards the HEIs when developing the new national quality system, including the development of processes and criteria for Agency-led reviews of study programmes/subjects. However, this co-operative spirit does not solve the problem, since the fact that the Agency was given this task in the first place, in itself can jeopardize the development of HEIs' culture of ownership and responsibility. (See also arguments about *diversification* below.)



Ownership and lack of responsibility may fail also on behalf of the institution, even in presence of good external preconditions. The internal system for QA and QE has to be developed and implemented in a way that ensures commitment throughout the organisation, from the university management to academic staff and students. One important challenge is to design a system that provides value for money, not least as perceived by academic staff. An overly ambitious and too bureaucratic system, cast in a one-size-fits-all mould, will be counterproductive. It would take resources from teaching and learning without corresponding gains, reduce the sense of ownership at the micro level, and thereby decrease the buy-in by academic staff and students. This may bring any system down to its knees.

Finally, and most importantly, the results generated by the HEIs own QA-QE systems have to be acted upon. If not, the systems' cost-effectiveness is prone to be low. Academic leaders at all levels must be ready to act resolutely on identified deficiencies. The effectiveness of this feed-back-loop should be the main focus of the Agency's institutional reviews. The HEI's will have to prove that they can take prompt action without the external pressure caused by the immediate threat of lost degree awarding powers. Otherwise, the HEI's QA system as a whole may not pass the Agency-led institutional review.

Control and enhancement

It is clear that the new national QA system allows for both *control* and *enhancement*. According to the framework, the individual HEIs are obliged to have a QA system, while the Agency controls whether this system is satisfactory. This division of roles allows for HEIs to commission study programme/subject reviews that ensure that the bar for acceptable quality and standards is met, while also contributing effectively to the HEIs' own agenda for enhancement and renewal. This agenda is prone to differ between and within HEIs – and from time to time.

The new system will also allow for students to take a more active role, both in control and enhancement. They can participate in all phases of study programme/subject reviews – from the planning stage to the phase when the results are acted upon. If this possibility is used, it will be a huge step forward in realising the quest for student centeredness, which is emphasised in the revised ESG. Such far-reaching integration of students in the review process is just not possible when reviews are led by the Agency. In Agency-led reviews, student participation is largely limited to being on the reviewer panels, and being interviewed.

It is however the HEIs' responsibility to build systems that allows for both control and enhancement. They have to make sure that the reviews they commission have teeth, i.e. that reviewers have possibilities to make serious investigations and judgements of quality, and that the HEIs themselves take prompt action if deficiencies are detected. Likewise, they have to design systems that intentionally drives enhancement, and involves students.



One potential threat to reaching a sufficient degree of control is lack of externality in the HEIs' own study programme/subject reviews. Some have criticised the new system for promoting navel-gazing. By letting the HEIs “review themselves”, the system’s legitimacy may be justly questioned. External peer review is a QA method that is deeply rooted in the academic quality culture, especially in research. There is no reason why it should not be employed in this context as well. If it will be up to the HEIs to decide, however, those who really would benefit from an external view on their study programmes/subjects might not get it. This is especially important since Sweden do not have a system of external examiners like some other countries.

To realise the full potential of the new national quality system, HEIs have to design systems that control quality, but also lead to institutional learning as a driver for change. It is important that the HEIs do resist looking on QA as an administrative procedure or a competitive game, but rather as a means of becoming better through identifying both problems and success, in order to ensure academic standards and improve conditions for student learning.³ (Brennan, 2012)

The new national system is definitely more enhancement oriented than the old. First and foremost, it allows the HEIs to build coherent QA systems that resonates well with their mission and organisation. Further, in contrast to the former Agency-led reviews, the new ones will allow for reviewers to provide rich feedback to the HEIs. Further, focus will not only be on results but also on preconditions and processes, which indirectly promotes an enhancement focus. Still, the Agency-led reviews will not be as clearly enhancement oriented as, for example, the Scottish Enhancement-Led Institutional Reviews.

Diversification

In the former national quality system, all study programme/subject reviews were carried out by the national Agency in a uniform manner for all HEIs. One important purpose was of course to enable comparisons between the same study programmes/subjects at different HEIs. However, the old system was sometimes criticised for indirectly creating a national norm for each study programme/subject, thereby limiting the space for appropriate variation in emphasis and profile between different HEIs. Sometimes the system was said to have a conservative bias. The national reviews were believed to hinder appropriate *diversification* in profile and content of study programmes and subjects offered in the country.

Since diversification in institutional profiles is an important means of meeting complex societal needs, the national quality system should rather promote than hinder differentiation and flexibility. And a QA system should be constructed in such a way that it could take into account QA reviews performed in other frameworks – for instance international

³ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/impact-of-quality-assurance.pdf>



accreditations – and thereby avoid duplication. An important advantage of the new system is precisely that it allows for these things.

However, external forces are not the only ones that hinder HEIs from doing what they should be doing. Diversification must in the first place rest on firm internal ambitions, and an easy way out is always to copy what others do without due consideration – both concerning the profile of study programmes/subjects and the criteria used to assess their quality. It is a real challenge for HEIs to use the opportunity for diversification that the new system provides.

As mentioned, a threat to these ambitions can unfortunately be the criteria developed by the Agency for use in its study programme/subject reviews. In the first place, they may curb diversification among study programmes/subjects that we already know will be reviewed by the Agency. However, since any study programme/subject theoretically can be reviewed by the Agency in the future, there is of course a risk that HEIs may choose to “play it safe” and refrain from developing their study programmes/subjects and their quality criteria in new, and innovative directions.

International legitimacy

The former Swedish national system for QA of higher education was not in concordance with the ESG – a fact that damaged the international legitimacy of QA of higher education in Sweden. Since the ESG, together with Swedish law and the national framework spelled out in the Higher Education Act, are the basis for the new system one important obstacle to the restoration of international legitimacy is removed.

But of course legitimacy also rests on what the new system will lead to once implemented. If the actual execution of the system is unsatisfactory, legitimacy will not be restored. So could happen if the national Agency fails to review the institutional systems in a tough but fair way – and/or fails to take appropriate actions when needed. So could also happen if HEIs do not review their study programmes and subjects in a tough but fair way – and/or fails to take appropriate actions when needed.

Last but not least, it would not be acceptable if all reviews are carried out in a satisfactory way, but show that a lot of study programmes and subjects are of poor quality. Periodic reviews of study programmes/subjects should not be the HEIs’ only way to assure and promote quality. Instead, as HEIs we should continuously develop our study programmes and subjects to the best of our knowledge, so that we are pretty sure that reviewers will find that they are of high quality once they are reviewed. In doing this, the quality culture at the HEIs and their faculties and departments are most central – including means of systematic follow up and readiness for change.

If all this works well, we can rest assured that the legitimacy of the Swedish quality system for higher education will be restored - nationally and internationally.



References: See notes

Discussion questions:

1. How can a national organization of universities (i.e. a rectors' conference or the like) influence national policy on QA of education?
2. Is it possible to mix QA processes emanating from different QA regimes and ideologies? What might happen if you do?
3. What are the potential possibilities and challenges of a national quality system that provides a high degree of ownership and responsibility on behalf of HEIs (beyond those presented here)?

Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 25 July 2016 to QAForum@eua.be. The file should be named using the last names of the authors, e.g. Smith_Jones.doc. Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.