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Swedish Policies for Higher Education and Employability Consequences for non-traditional students¹

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The general picture in Sweden, as elsewhere, is that HE graduates have better chances to become employed than people with a lower educational level. Sweden has had a long tradition of including non-traditional students into higher education (HE) by widening access, building new higher education institutions, and upgrading post-secondary education to tertiary education (SOU, 2015; Thunborg & Bron, 2012). The amount of HE graduates has increased dramatically in relation to these changes. During the recent decade and in accordance with EU and national policies, issues of employability have become a politically important.

Fejes (2010) claims that the shift from employment towards employability, means a shift in responsibility from the society and the labour market to the individuals. HE institutions (HEI) are also seen as responsible for enhancing or developing the appropriate competencies of individual students (SOU, 2015). The match between the supply of educational graduates and the requirements and demands of the labour market has thereby become a central issue.

The policy for widening access of non-traditional students and the policy of employability can on the one hand be regarded as two strategies for enhancing social mobility. On the other hand, the two policies do not seem to be related to each other, for example when studying policy documents we did not find any special interest concerning/concern regarding non-traditional students in relation to employability.

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Thus, in this paper we want to address the relation between issues of equality and employability, especially regarding/in regards to their consequences for Swedish non-traditional students.

By non-traditional students we mean, in the broadest sense, under-represented groups participating in HE (Bron & Lönnheden, 2004). In this paper, as elsewhere (Finnegan, Merrill & Thunborg 2014), when writing about non-traditional students we refer both to mature as well as young adult students that are the first in their family to enter HE in Sweden (see Thunborg, Bron, Edström, 2012). However, in this paper we focus especially on two issues, i.e. class and ethnicity of non-traditional students.

The way to approach our inquiry and be able to discuss, on the one hand the match between students' demands and patterns of participation in HE, and on the other the requirements and demands of the labour market and society, we rely on official statistics and policy documents (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2012; 2014; 2015).

Swedish HE policies concerning widening access and employability

In Sweden the concept of employability is defined from a competence-based perspective, focusing on students' skills in relation to the needs of the labour market, as the authors outside Sweden perceive it and write about it in comparison to other EU countries (Eurydice, 2014; Yorke, 2006). There is, however, no clear definition of employability presented by the Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ) that is the body executing the state's policy (governmental policy formulated by the Ministry of Higher Education). In the UKÄ reports, one way of measuring employability is related to students' establishment on the labour market one to two years after the award of qualifications within the area for the graduate diploma (degree) (UKÄ, 2013).

From the political point of view, HE is seen as a means for both employment and for making society more equal by widening participation. The tradition of widening access for non-traditional students in HE is still a central goal, together with a new emphasis on making HE graduates employable on the labour market. According to the Ministry of Higher Education the supply of HE programmes should be related to both students demands and the needs of the labour market (Utbildningsdepartementet:

U2012/6996SAM). In line with this, the Swedish government has set up a committee to investigate whether the supply of educational programmes is well matched in relation to the demands for quality, from students perspective and the needs from the labour market, as well as society (Utbildningsdepartementet: Kommittédirektiv, diarienummer: 2014:54). One year later the Government Official Report was ready and named *Higher education under twenty years* (SOU 2015:70). This report, however, is not covering issues dedicated to non-traditional students.

Inequalities concerning class regarding participation in HE in Sweden

Despite the reforms for widening participation in Higher Education, inequalities concerning social class persist. According to UKÄ (2014) students with parents without third cycle education are less represented in HE than other students. According to UKÄ (2015):

A total of 44 per cent of those born in 1988 had begun to study in higher education by the age of 25. But for those with at least one parent with a research qualification (licentiate or doctoral degree) the initial participation rate was considerably higher – 84 per cent. In comparison, a mere 22 per cent of those whose parents had only completed lower-secondary education had begun higher education studies (UKÄ, 2015, page 25)

There are also social differences relating to the choices of educational programmes (ibid):

A larger proportion of those whose parents have advanced educational qualifications choose long programmes that are programmes in medicine (where 70 per cent of HE entrants in the academic year of 2011/12 offer preparation for professions in which there are often good career prospects). Some examples had parents with advanced educational qualifications, Bachelor's programmes in law (55 per cent) and Master's programmes in engineering (54 per cent). In programmes leading to the award of general qualifications students whose parents have advanced educational qualifications are more likely to study for a Master's degree (50 per cent in the academic year of 2011/12). (UKÄ, 2014, p. 25).

What programmes do non-traditional students, i.e. students with parents with lower educational level, chose? According to UKÄ (2015) vocational teacher education is considered to have the highest degree of students having parents with a low educational

level, namely 47 per cent of the students. Even pre-school teacher education has a high proportion of students with parents having a low educational level, 41 per cent.

Inequalities concerning ethnicity regarding participation in HE in Sweden

The overall differences concerning ethnicity is according to UKÄ (2015) small with 41 per cent of those with international background, i.e. students born in another country than Sweden or with both parents born outside Sweden, compared to 44 per cent of students born in Sweden and with both parents born in Sweden. However, in the earlier report we claimed that there are differences between ethnical groups where 55 per cent of the Iranian and 21 per cent of the Somalis had entered HE 2011/2012 (Bron, Thunborg & Edström, 2014, p.63). In addition, Sweden is gaining a considerable number of higher education graduates through migration. A total of 20.500 immigrants came to Sweden with higher education qualification in 2010. However, only 5.000 applied for validation of their exams during the same year (UKÄ, 2013).

When looking at the participation rate of students with another ethnical background the dental and health care sector appears to be the common choice. 59 per cent of students studying dental hygiene, 55 per cent of the dentist students and 49 per cent of students studying biomedical laboratory science have another ethnical background than Swedish (UKÄ, 2015:8).

The match between supply and demands

According to the overall figures concerning unemployment in Sweden, HE graduates have better chances to become employed than people with a lower educational level. The unemployment rate amongst people with higher education level is 5 per cent compared to 7, 5 per cent of those with upper secondary school and almost 21 per cent of people lacking an exam from upper secondary school (www.ekonomifakta.se). In the statistics from UKÄ (2014) 78 per cent of those graduating from HE 2009/10 had established themselves in the labour market in 2011. One question that could be asked is whether the graduates from HE match the demands from the labour market.

UKÄ (2015) present a prognosis concerning the relation between demands and supply in different occupational areas and claims that there seems to be needs within the health

care sector, educational sector and the engineering sector in the future. There are, however, different reasons according to UKÄ, for these shortages (2013):

“In a number of these programmes, mainly in the health sector, the shortage is due to a lack of places on offer. Other programmes have places for more students but there are not enough interested applicants. The shortage of many different kinds of qualified teachers is likely to persist, unless more students choose these programmes”. (Ibid, p.44)

We can see, how students’ choices of educational programmes do not match with the needs from the labour market and society, as it is stated in the prognosis:

“At the same time more students, than will be needed, are being prepared for a number of fields. This applies, for instance, to artists, social workers and journalists. Here it can be seen that the number of interested students exceeds society’s needs”. (UKÄ; 2013, p. 44)

Summing up so far, there is a lack of people with competencies in the educational and health care sector for two different reasons, the first relates to the number of places offered by HE institutions, the other relates to a lack of applicants.

[Analyses of the employability of non-traditional students in HE](#)

In this paper, we have so far presented the participation of non-traditional students in HE, claiming that students having parents with a low educational level seem to choose programmes related to the educational sector, whilst students with another ethnical background seem to participate in educational programmes related to the dental- and health care sector. At the same time we claim that there is a need for educational and health care professionals. From this perspective non-traditional students seem to choose educational programmes for enhancing their own employability, as, graduates in these areas have better chances at the labour market to get employment, their strategy is to choose them. It could, however, also be other explanations for choosing these programmes. One of the reasons can, for example, be to get just a profession. As UKÄ (2013) states:

HE graduates from general academic programmes also usually find it more difficult to establish themselves than those with professional qualifications (UKÄ, 2013, p. 43).

Summing up, professional programmes are more often chosen by non-traditional students, and consequently, it is easier for those graduates who choose the area of health care and teaching to get employment.

Discussion

By relying on the official statistics and policy documents, we have discussed the employability of non-traditional students in Swedish Higher Education with a special interest for class and ethnicity. Especially our interest has been focused on the match between patterns of participation for non-traditional students in HE, and the needs and demands of the labour market and society.

From our results it seems like HE is becoming a means for a segregated labour market rather than an arena for equality and social mobility. Students having parents with higher education level to a larger extent participate in high status educational programmes such as medicine, engineering and law, but also to a larger extent in general academic programmes, both on bachelor as well as master levels, for getting a unique competence to compete with on the labour market and thereby enhancing their employability. Students with parents having low educational level chose to become pre-school teachers and vocational teachers when approaching HE. Finally, students with another ethnical background chose to become health care workers.

Despite widening access to higher education there are still inequalities in regards to participation. That non-traditional students choose programmes highly demanded by labour market, could be a consequence of wanting to secure their employment, but at the same time also contributing to a lack of social mobility among non-traditional graduates. We have to add, however, that the final grades non-traditional students are coming with from upper-secondary education to HE are not enough competitive to apply for programmes highly demanded.

What happened to the policy of equality in Swedish higher education? It seems like the market forces have taken over the policy of equality. In accordance with the concept of employability, individuals are responsible for their own choices, and choose such areas that contribute to the segregation on the labour market and in society at large, and prepare themselves to stay at the lower social stratification level despite gaining higher education graduation, thus not contributing to advance their own social mobility. Fine professions and general programmes are still chosen by the middle and upper classes,

while these which have lower demand and lower social status still by socially disadvantaged. This is a paradox of opening access to HE when the market forces steer students choices.

A lack of research concerning non-traditional students' employability

There are some studies concerning students' employability in Sweden, and their transition between HE and working life for students in a variety of occupational and educational areas (see Nyström, Abrandt Dahlgren & Dahlgren, 2010; Reid, Dahlgren, Petocz & Abrandt-Dahlgren, 2008; Johansson; Hård af Segerstad; Hult; Abrandt Dahlgren & Dahlgren, 2007; Johansson, Kopciewicz & Dahlgren, 2008; Nilsson & Nyström, 2013; Axelsson, 2009; Löfgren- Martinsson, 2009; Johansson, 2008; Ohlsson, 2009), but there are none which directly taking the perspective of non-traditional students. In a previous project (RANLHE) we were concerned with the access and retention of non-traditional students but we did not look at the issue of employability. However, Edström (2010) shows a difference between general and professional HE programmes where non-traditional students studying to become physiotherapist (professional programmes) were worried about not knowing enough after graduation, whilst students in biomedicine, which is a general programme, experienced difficulties to convince others about their competencies. There is however a need for further studies regarding the employability for non-traditional students in higher education.

Conclusion

Our conclusion, thus, is that the labour market is and will become increasingly segregated in Sweden, in terms of class and ethnicity, due to students' choices of HE programmes, but also due to HE policy of employability and widening access. What we do not know is something about the perspective of non-traditional students, their choices and view of how to become employable through higher education. More research is needed within this area.

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