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Sweden: State of the art in regards to employability of non-traditional students and graduates

Introduction

Sweden has a long tradition to include non-traditional students into higher education by widening access, building new higher education institutions, and upgrading post-secondary education to tertiary education (Thunborg & Bron, 2012). Another central issue the last decades is the relation between HE and employability, internationalization and globalization (Proposition 200/05:162; 2009/10:139). Fejes (2010a; b) claims that the shift from employment towards employability also implies a shift in the responsibility for employment, from the state and the employers towards the individual. This means that the individual citizen becomes responsible for having the right competencies needed for the labour market (Ibid). HE thereby also becomes responsible for enhancing the right competencies.

In the following section, we are going to discuss the state of the art in Sweden concerning Swedish national policy for employability. First of all a definition of employability and non-traditional students are presented from the Swedish perspective.

The definition of employability and non-traditional students

In Sweden, employability is defined from a competence-based definition focusing on students' skills in relation to the labour market (Eurydice, 2014; Yorke, 2006). There is however no clear definition of employability from the Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ). In the UKÄ reports, one way of measuring employability is related to students'

establishment on the labour market 1-2 years after the award of qualifications within the area for the diploma (UKÄ, 2013).

By non-traditional students in the broadest sense, we mean under-represented groups in HE (Bron & Lönnheden, 2004). In this report, as elsewhere (Finnegan, Merrill & Thunborg 2014), when writing about non-traditional students we refer to mature as well as young adult students that are the first in their family to enter HE and include perspectives in relation to age, class, ethnicity and gender (see Thunborg, Bron, Edström, 2012).

Swedish national policy for employability in HE

In September 2014, there was a political shift in Government, and Social Democrats together with the Milieu party are since then in power. The new Minister of Higher Education and Research, Helene Hellmark Knutsson, together with Eva Nordmark, Chair for TCO (The Swedish Confederation for Professional Employees) made a political statement in a debate article (January 22, UNT) emphasising that “All bright people should have a chance to be educated for themselves, for the future economy and for the society at large” and that “HE should lead to employment for HE graduates to a larger extent than now”. Furthermore, they claimed that HE still is unequal in relation to family background and age, and that the solution to these challenges was to increase the number of places in HE with 14.000 to the year 2018. Moreover to develop more places in different parts of the country to reach students with less educated parents and to improve the quality of the education by expanding the budget with 250.000 SKR yearly, with the beginning of 2016 (Hellmark – Knutsson & Nordmark, 2015).

From this political statement, HE to a large extent 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, but also to make HE graduates employable on a labour market. From the ministry of Higher education the supply of HE programmes should relate to both students demands and the needs of the labour market (Utbilningsdepartementet: U2012/6996SAM). In accordance 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 (Utbilningsdepartementet: Kommittédirektiv, diarienummer: 2014:54).

A central goal for Swedish HE is that: “education and research at Universities and University Colleges are going to be of international high quality and efficient” (Högskoleförordningen, 2014:1096). As the Swedish HE system is decentralised, each university and university college are responsible for the supply of courses and for the quality assurance at their own institution (Ibid). However, the Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ) is responsible for the national evaluation of the quality in relation to the national legislation (Ibid). The system for national evaluation is about to change with a new system from the 1st of January 2016 and in the ordinances, the new system should both control the quality of Higher education in each HEI and suggest improvements (Utbildningsdepartementet: promemoria, U2015/1626UH).

In Europe 2020, a ten-year strategy for European policy for smart sustainability and growth, five headline targets relating to employment are formulated, whereas two of them have direct bearing on the HE sector, i.e. Research and development and Education. The target concerning research and development states that 3 per cent of GDP should be invested, raising the level of educational attainment in the EU and concerning education, that 40 per cent of the 30–34 age cohort should have at least two years of tertiary education in 2020 (UKÄ, 2014, p. 11). This target had an impact on Swedish policy and has been a goal for HE.

Employability is discussed on a policy level both in relation to a political intention of expanding HE, widening participation, advanced the quality of education and discussion about the supply of courses related to the needs of the labour market, the students and the society as a whole. At the same, time the central goal for HE is still to be on international high quality level and efficient. However, it is not clear to what extent these issues of quality and efficiency are related to the issue of employability.

Policies concerning employability for non-traditional students in HE

Despite the political tradition of widening access for non-traditional students and the interest for issues of employability, the two policies do not seem to be connected or related to each other. We have not found anything in the policy documents concerning a special interest for non-traditional students in relation to employability.

National statistics

The national statistics available in Sweden is provided by SCB – National statistical agency and Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ and previously SHEA). There are statistics about access to HE regarding issues of age, social class (measured as parents educational level), disabilities, ethnicity and gender. There are also statistics regarding employment for graduates divided into different educational areas and estimations of future employment needs in relation to different educational areas. There is, however, no direct statistics of employment regarding non-traditional students available. The national statistics is here divided into statistics concerning HE graduates in Sweden, HE graduates establishment on the labour market, differences between educational areas, gender and age.

HE graduates in Sweden

According to UKÄ (2013), there has been a large increase in graduates from HE in Sweden and that the prognosis is a further expansion of graduates:

“The total number of graduates from higher education entering the labour market in Sweden is considerably larger than the number of graduates who retire each year. Between 2000 and 2010, the number of individuals with tertiary education increased by 440,000” (about 5 per cent of the Swedish population) as UKÄ states: “Given the current volume of higher education this development will continue, although more slowly than hitherto. The number of students in higher education is twice as large then it was twenty years ago. This major expansion in higher education means that several categories of graduates will increase in number during the next decades, even if there is no further increase in the number of places offered” (UKÄ, 2013:3, p. 42).

“One result of the major expansion of higher education that took place during the 1990s and the early years of this century is that several groups of graduates are going to be larger in the next few decades – even if higher education expands no further. In most subject areas, the numbers of new graduates will exceed the numbers of graduates leaving the labour market, through retirement for instance. In several professions, there is a greater demand for graduates than there used to be. Employers are seeking more advanced skills in many professional areas, despite that qualification from higher education are not strictly necessary. This may also be the effect of the growth of graduates’ number in the labour market, which makes it even more difficult for those who lack such qualifications and need to compete with them. The number of individuals with qualifications from tertiary education (the vast majority of them graduates) rose by 550,000 between 2000 and 2012”. (UKÄ, 2014:10, p. 44).

In the report from 2013, we can also read that HE graduates from other countries are expanding because of migration to Sweden:

“A total of 20,500 immigrants with higher education qualifications came to Sweden in 2010 from other countries (according to their own information about their educational attainments) and in the same year just over 5,000 applications for recognition were made to the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education. From 1 January 2013, the responsibility for evaluating qualifications from abroad has been taken over by the Swedish Council for Higher Education. In addition there are qualifications from abroad that are evaluated by other authorities, for instance Socialstyrelsen (the National Board of Health and Welfare) when they concern the health services. Altogether the number of recognitions, registrations and certificates of qualified status issued for individuals from abroad corresponds to about one tenth of the total number of qualifications awarded by higher education institutions in Sweden each year”. “The reason why the number of highly qualified immigrants applying for recognition of their qualifications is not larger may be that many of them have already found work in Sweden or begun supplementary studies”. (UKÄ, 2013, p. 42)

A conclusion from the statistics concerning HE in Sweden is an overall expansion of HE graduates.

HE graduates' establishment on the labour market

The Swedish Higher Education Authority uses the definition of establishment once developed by the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education. According to that one “assesses graduates as established if they were gainfully employed in November, earn more than a specific amount and have not been students, moved abroad or had periods of unemployment during the year or been involved in labour market policy measures. Establishment is measured 12–18 months after graduation and graduates are grouped in different categories on the basis of which sector of the labour market their qualifications relate to”. (UKÄ, 2014, p.45). From the national statistics of UKÄ, we can read that:

“SHEA (previously the Swedish Agency for Higher Education) has monitored establishment in the labour market for all the annual cohorts of graduates from 1994/95 until 2009/10. On the whole, establishment has mirrored the state of the economy, al-though there are areas where developments have been different from those in the labour market as a whole. The percentages of those establishing themselves have varied between 67 and 82, in other words a difference of 15 percentage points”. (UKÄ, 2014, p. 45).

“The most recent figures show that 78 per cent of those graduating from higher education in 2009/10 had established themselves in the labour market in 2011. The criteria for establishment include information about earnings, periods of unemployment or participation in labour market policy measures 6 to 18 months after graduation. The proportion of those established was almost three percentage points higher than the corresponding figure one year earlier. One reason can be found in the financial crisis

that occurred in 2008/09 and the ensuing decline in employment. Since then the numbers gainfully employed have risen again”. (UKÄ, 2014, p. 45).

The proportion of those established varied of course from discipline to discipline. In 2011 graduates within the area of technology, medicine and health care to a large extent was established and nine out of ten graduates physicians, dentists or graduates from Master’s degrees in engineering had established themselves within 1.5 years. More importantly, most of the graduates in these occupations, who started to work on the labour market in 2009, had jobs closely linked to the field in which they qualified, while those with general academic qualifications found employment in different occupations. HE graduates from general academic programmes also usually find it more difficult to establish themselves than those with professional qualifications (UKÄ, 2013, p. 43).

Gender differences among the establishment of HE graduates

According to the statistics, women are more qualified than men are and among HE graduates, they have a lower unemployment rate than men. The reason for this seems to be that they are overrepresented in educational programmes leading to employment. UKÄ states:

“In the population as a whole, there are more qualified women than men. Overall fewer women are gainfully employed than men are, but, according to Statistics Sweden’s unemployment survey, a larger proportion of the women with higher education are employed than men. In 2012, 4.5 per cent of the women with tertiary qualifications were unemployed, compared to 5.2 per cent of the men. This difference is largely due to gender differences in various educational and vocational fields. Women are overrepresented in professional programmes that lead to employment in education and social and health care, where there has been no shortage of jobs in recent years.” (UKÄ, 2013, p. 41).

Future supply and demand for graduates

According to the UKÄ, it is difficult to make prognoses of employment needs for the future:

“The demand for graduates differs in different vocational fields. Forecasting future labour market needs is a difficult undertaking as they are affected by so many different circumstances that cannot easily be predicted. What can, however, be foreseen is the recruitment that will be required because of retirement. It is possible to analyse the age structure in different vocational fields to estimate the supply of graduates from different programmes that will be required in the future. Estimates of this kind are made by the Forecast Institute at Statistics Sweden, the most recent one in 2012” (UKÄ, 2013, p.44).

In the figure 1 that we present, the UKÄ statistics shows a prognosis concerning the relation between demands and supply in different occupational areas. Mainly, there seems to be a need for teachers, biomedical scientists, and engineers with first-cycle qualifications, nurses and dentists. The reason for this shortage according to UKÄ (2013) is the following:

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)

Students’ choices of educational programmes also seem to be mismatched with the need from the labour market:

“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)

In the following figure, an analysis of the prognosis between supply and demands from the labour market is presented (UKÄ, 2015:16). According to this, such areas like teaching and health care are having high demands whilst fine, applied and performing arts, journalism and media as well as humanities seem to have a high supply.

The prognosis could have implications for the employability of non-traditional graduates. Vocational teacher’s education, which is considered to have the highest demands according to UKÄ, also has the highest degree of students’ with parents having a low educational level, namely 47 per cent of the students. Even pre-school-teachers programme has high demands as well as a high population of students with parents with low educational level (41 per cent) (UKÄ 2015:8).

Figure 27. Future balances of supply and demand in the labour market. The diagram shows the balance between the number of graduates and recruitment needs (expressed as percentages) for various disciplinary areas if no changes occur in the numbers of HE entrants for the academic year of 2015 / 16.

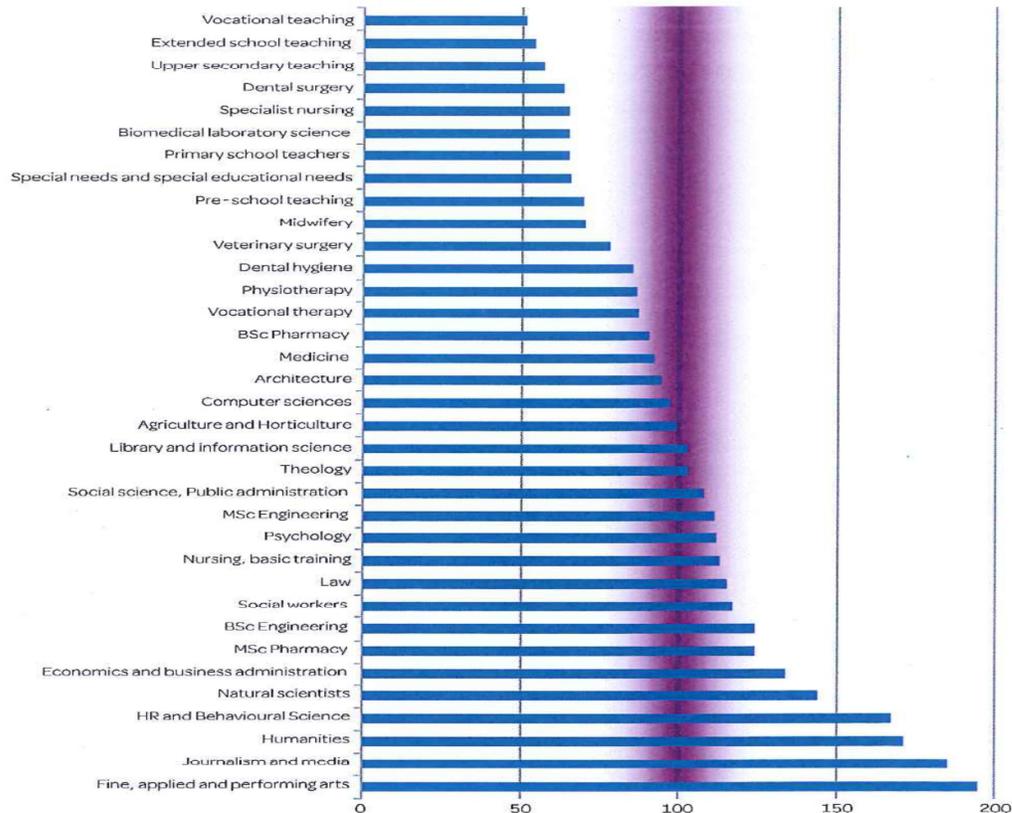


Figure 1. The prognosis between supply and demands in relation to the labour market.

Furthermore, vocational areas such as dentists, biomedical laboratory science and dental hygiene with high demands have a high representation of students with another background than Swedish, which according to UKÄ (2015:8), consists of students that either are born abroad or are born in Sweden with both parents born abroad. According to UKÄ, 59 per cent of students in dental hygiene, 55 per cent of the dentist students and 49 per cent of the students in biomedical laboratory science have another ethnical background. The conclusions from the UKÄ about gender issues could, with regards to the prognosis, also concern class and ethnicity the next couple of years. However, these conclusions are not drawn by the UKÄ. Consequently, the labour market in Sweden will be even more segregated in relation to class and ethnicity.

National research concerning employability, non-traditional students in HE and the relation between them

Fejes (2010a; 2010b) has made discourse analyses of European documents as well as interviews with health care personnel in elderly care about the concepts of employability and lifelong learning. He draws the conclusion that both the discourses of employability and lifelong learning has shifted the view of employment and education towards making the individual responsible for their own learning as well as their own competencies and skills and their value on the labour market. In his analysis he means that these changes in discourses, to a large extent, affect the individual's construction of being responsible for his/her own employability and the state construed as enablers.

In a project carried out by Nyström, Abrandt-Dahlgren & Dahlgren, (2010) the transition from higher education to employment both in nationally and internationally was studied (Nyström, Abrandt Dahlgren & Dahlgren, 2010). More specifically, they study the skills that seem to contribute to form professional identity (see e.g. Reid, Dahlgren, Petocz & Abrandt-Dahlgren, 2008) as well as made comparisons between skills acquired at general and professional programmes (Johansson; Hård af Segerstad; Hult; Abrandt Dahlgren & Dahlgren, 2007; Johansson, Kopciewicz & Dahlgren, 2008). This group of researchers from Linköping University is, to a big extent, concentrating on how students experience transition from education to work.

One interesting conclusion from the studies concerning transition from higher education to work is that psychology students (becoming legitimised psychologists) experienced transition between studies and labour market much easier than those who studied political sciences. The latter experienced the feelings of being insecure what they were able to do (what knowledge did they have) and how they could look for the job. (Nyström, et al. 2010). In another research report from Stockholm University (Edström, 2009) we can see how non-traditional students who were studying to become physiotherapist were worried about that they did not know enough after the graduation, men those who were studying biomedicine experienced very good knowledge but difficulties to convince others about their competencies. Therefore, we think that there are interesting differences between academic and professional programmes in higher education.

Out of our previous project (Thunborg, Bron & Edström, 2012, 2013) we found that non-traditional students formed different student and learning identities in higher education related to their motives for studying. Some of the students formed an instrumental identity with a low commitment to higher education, just continuing to get a degree for being employed and not for learning. This creates a tension between the discourse of employability and the traditional discourse of higher education, of being a good student. Edwardsson-Stiwne and Gaio Alves (2010) from Linköping University made a comparative study between Sweden and Portugal focusing on the relationship between higher education, employability of graduates and students' satisfaction with their studies. They conclude that both Sweden and Portugal are facing new challenges to meet young students' expectations and demands.

Challenges for the Swedish HE system in relation to employability

According to the Swedish HE Authority (UKÄ, 2013) the target in the Euro 2020 Agenda concerning research and development stating that 3 per cent of GDP should be invested, raising the level of educational attainment in the EU. At the same time concerning education, that 40 per cent of the 30–34 age cohort should have at least two years of tertiary education in 2020 was already met 2013 (UKÄ, 2014, p. 11). In Sweden, the general picture is that students with a diploma from higher education have a better chance to become employed than people with lower educational level have had, and will be during the next years, even if HE is expanding. There are however other challenges regarding employability for non-traditional graduates. These are related to inequalities regarding access to higher education, a mismatch between students' choices and the needs of the labour market (demands and supply) and the migration of HE graduates from other countries.

Sweden has a long tradition of widening participation for non-traditional students in HE. Since the 1950s, different reforms have undertaken to reduce unequal access (Bron & Thunborg, 2012). The widening of access has been seen as a way to both economic growth and social equality in society, and way for society to make the most of peoples' abilities (Husén, 1947; Husén & Härnqvist, 2000). Despite the reforms for widening participation, the central aim in the legislation for Higher Education (Högskoleförordningen, 1994) and the central political interest from the new Social Democratic government (Hellmark-Knutsson & Nordmark, 2014) the inequality between different student groups persists. According to UKÄ:

“During the academic year of 2012/13, 37 per cent of HE entrants under the age of 35 had parents with advanced educational qualifications, i.e. one parent who had completed at least three years of

tertiary education. This can be compared to the 24 per cent of HE entrants whose parents lacked advanced educational qualifications (no more than two years of upper-secondary education). In the population as a whole aged 19–34 (data from 2011), the situation was the opposite: 24 per cent had parents with advanced educational qualifications and 40 per cent parents without. These comparisons provide a rough illustration of the social bias in recruitment to higher education and show that students whose parents have advanced educational qualifications are overrepresented while students whose parents lack such educational qualifications are underrepresented”. (UKÄ, 2014, p. 25).

Furthermore social differences among students also relates to the choice of educational programmes:

“Students from different social backgrounds are not only more or less likely to begin higher education but also to some extent to opt for different types of programmes. A larger proportion of those whose parents have advanced educational qualifications choose long programmes that offer preparation for professions in which there are often good career prospects. Some examples are programmes in medicine (where 70 per cent of HE entrants in the academic year of 2011/12 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). In comparison this group accounted for only 23 per cent of the HE entrants in the shorter Higher Education Diploma programmes” (UKÄ, 2014, p. 25).

In the political statement of the new minister of higher education and research, the differences concerning social class i.e. parents educational level and its effect on participation, age and the decline of mature students in HE as a prioritized area. In the statement from the new minister, two solutions were mentioned, one to increase the number of places in HE outside the cities and traditional university areas and a total increasing of the places in HE as a whole. According to the legislation, universities are responsible for widening access but it is not clear to what extent this will be included in the new quality assurance system on the national level.

Another interrelated challenge for the Swedish HE regards the match between on the one hand the students’ choices of educational programme and on the other the needs of the labour market. The match between students’ demands and the needs of the labour market is discussed in three different ways. Firstly, the labour market employs HE graduates to positions earlier occupied by people with lower educational levels (UKÄ, 2014). This does not mean that the work tasks have become more qualified but rather that there is a risk for an

overqualified work force (UKÄ, 2014). Secondly, there are 55 different educational areas defined by UKÄ (2014), most of them requiring HE diploma, that lack qualified graduates. The reason for this is, on the one hand, a lack of places in HE in certain areas, but also a lack of applicants to certain educational areas. Students do not seem to apply to these areas to enough extent. Thirdly, students seem to choose educational programmes where there is a lack of positions on the labour market, which means an increasing competition among students to reach the few positions. This creates a high competition among students and a crucial situation for the labour market not being able to employ people with the right competencies.

Finally, the population of HE graduates increases in Sweden because of migration from other countries. One challenge is to validate their diplomas for making them employable but according to UKÄ (2013) only 5000 out of 20.500 people have applied for a validation. Migration could thereby be seen as affecting the degree of employability in Sweden, which means a more qualified population, but could, at the same time, create higher levels of unemployment for HE graduates.

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