Widening access to higher education in Sweden: changing political ideologies, changing tactics?

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Overview

- Higher education, tuition fees and student support in Sweden
- Routes of access to higher education
- HE and school reforms from the 1960s – from social democratic policy to neo-liberal
- Widening access in higher education in Sweden
- Sweden in Europe
- Conclusion – exploring the tensions between top-down social democratic and neo-liberal institutionally driven measures for widening access
Higher education, tuition fees and student support in Sweden

- 16 universities, 14 higher education institutes (högskolor), 5 creative arts institutions and 13 other more specialised higher education - oldest university dates back to 15th century
- Tuition is free at all levels for home, EU/ES, Swiss students
- Student support for FT and PT students (min 50% studies) up to the age of 56 normally max 240 weeks
- Consists of non-repayable student bursary and a student loan - basic amount FT 100,160 Swedish Kronor for 40 weeks made up of a non-repayable bursary of 28,480 (£2,762) and a loan of 71,680 (£6,864).
- Means tested on student’s own income not parents
Current routes of access to HE

- ‘Traditional’ entry route by completion of upper secondary education or equivalent
- Accreditation of prior learning – but this does attach credit to specific learning – applicants using this route are advised to use third route
- Högskoleprovet (Scholastic Aptitude Test) – cost around £40 and can be taken twice a year and there is no limit on the number of times
- From 1992 a basårskurs (access course), initially only for shortage subjects, from 2003 opened up but still only in areas of labour market need – highly flexible courses
HE reforms in the 1970s

- University expansion post war – 14,000 students in 1945 – 125,000 by 1970 led to reform of 1977
- Stable social democratic government with strong emphasis on equality, increasing participation and the needs of the labour market
- Regional access improved through new HE institutions
- 25/5 rule (over age 25 and 5 years’ work experience) introduced for those without relevant qualifications
- Högskoleprovet (scholastic aptitude test) introduced for those without relevant qualifications
School reforms in the 1960s

- Strong emphasis on equality led to school system changing from selective to comprehensive – grundskolan was introduced in 1962
- Vocational education became part of the school system in 1971
- Vocational education included ‘general’ education to ease transfer to higher education
- In addition, provision of adult education was strengthened
- Earlier school reforms contribute to improving access to higher education
HE reforms from the 1990s onwards

- Neo-liberal government move towards new public management and deregulation – shrinking the role of the state – indicators on outcomes as well as enrolment – greater emphasis on individual choice
- Further regionalisation to improve access
- Högskoleprovet opened up to all removing its ‘protected’ status for those with no prior qualifications
- 25/4 rule (which granted extra bonus in Högskoleprovet) removed
- From 2006 changes to entry conditions potentially limiting access for some (Nylund, 2012)
School reforms from the 1990s

- ‘Loosening the grip of the state’ (Lundahl, 2002) with emphasis on parental power and choice of schools
- Free schools introduced
- Vocational education courses increased to 3 years (from 2) in response to poor outcomes for some young people
- Reform of 1991 had a mixed message – loosening state control and focus on individual choice whilst strengthening the academic aspect of vocational education to avoid ‘dead ends’ (Nylund, 2012)
‘Breddad rekrytering’
Widening access – new focus

- Since 2001 – student population should reflect general population
- Resources provided to support institutions
- Institutions required to develop a plan to widen access and report on this (2002 to 2010) – 2 evaluations showed mixed success
- Universitets och Högskolerådet (Swedish Council for Higher Education) formed in 2013 and commissioned to document and analyse widening access measures at institutional level – reported in 2016
- Parental level of education: HE or non-HE is now used as measure – widening access focused on those from non-HE background (as the rest of Europe)
UHR’s recommendations to institutions

That institutions:

- develop strategy for widening access and participation
- develop methods to gather data on their student populations
- demonstrate how they intend to achieve goals identified in strategy
- show how they plan to support underrepresented groups prior to entry, during course and on entry to labour market
- indicate how they intend to use alternative selection tools (e.g. assessment of prior learning)
- demonstrate how they follow-up on students after labour market entry

Finally to support the institutions – that they (UHR) be given the task of monitoring widening access progress in the institutions

Very similar to outcome agreements but without legal backing
Summary so far

- 1960s and 70s educational reforms were top-down with great focus on equality and removing social class differences
- Access routes to HE were introduced for those lacking formal qualifications and adult education strengthened
- Reforms from the 1990s focused on decentralisation and individual choice and access routes not preserved for those lacking in formal qualifications
- Adult education opportunities reduced
- Concerns over widening access (re)emerged in the 2000s culminating in report of 2016 but focus still on institutions and removal of ‘protected’ alternative routes not discussed …
- BUT in comparison to others in Europe Sweden is doing relatively well …
Eurostudent survey V: alternative routes to higher education (Hauschildt, et al 2015)
### Routes of access to HE
(Orr and Hovdhaugen, 2014 from Eurostudent Survey IV)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Route</th>
<th>All students</th>
<th>Students from low HE background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Upper secondary school diploma (Gymnasieskolan)</td>
<td>71.5%</td>
<td>58.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult education at upper secondary level (Kommunal vuxenutbildning)</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other education (Annan utbildningsform)</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work experience (25:4) (Arbetslivserfarenhet)</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognition of competences (Validering a reell kompetens)</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Alternative routes of entry

**Eurostudent V – changes emerging**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Route</th>
<th>Students with high HE background</th>
<th>Students with low HE background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adult education at upper secondary level</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(Kommunal vuxenutbildning)</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special exam for certain groups of students</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special access course <em>(basårskurs)</em></td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accreditation of prior learning and or vocational learning</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Eurostudent V
Conclusion

- Sweden has been at the forefront of opening opportunities for non-traditional students but concerns about widening access remain based on data showing lack of progress in last two decades; stratification in access similar to the UK and other Western European countries

- Different political ideologies employed somewhat different tactics:
  - Early social democratic measures provided special entry routes for those lacking relevant qualifications – later social democratic governments have done little to reverse changes made by conservative governments
  - Neo-liberal policies emphasise choice and open up these routes to all, removed the 25/4 entry route as well as reduced adult education

- It is not possible to directly compare the two time periods due to data differences – but lack of progress since 2000 suggests that current measures based on neo-liberal ideology are having limited impact and that middle-class concerns of unfair advantage for some have had an impact which limits access for those most disadvantaged