

## Strategic change in Swedish higher education

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**Abstract.** Organizational fields, in theory, are held to become increasingly isomorphic and standardized over time. At first sight, Sweden's system of higher education is an illustrative case. In its major post-war event, the radical 1977 reform, a variety of means was introduced to pave the way for goal-driven planning and management. The intentions were overall homogeneity and rationality. This is quite in accordance with the theory of organizational fields. Yet, despite intentions, homogeneity remained a rather thin veneer, unable to prevent various forms of disparity from breaking through. Reality, therefore, was more on par with Trow's and others' theses of differentiation in mass higher education; isomorphism taking the place of a formal, inconvenient façade. Effects of four principal reform aspects are discussed in the present article: admission, instruction, institutional classification, and organizational framework. In the analysis of the last-mentioned aspect, a theory of 'planning cultures' is introduced. Further changes in the wake of the reform are also touched upon. The results are discussed in a final section, where alternative re-reform measures and outlines for further research are put forth. Intended and unintended consequences, including dysfunctional ones, are subjects of attention throughout the article.

In a seminal article, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argued that 'organizational fields' are characterized by increasing similarity between organizations. They defined an organizational field as 'those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life.' Against Weber, who argued that bureaucratization is motivated by efficiency goals, the authors (1983: 147) contended that:

bureaucratization and other forms of organizational change occur as the result of processes that make organizations more similar without necessarily making them more efficient. ... [H]ighly structured organizational fields provide a context in which individual efforts to deal rationally with uncertainty and constraint often lead, in the aggregate, to homogeneity in structure, culture, and output.

The homogenization thesis was also directed against contingency theorists, who, as is well-known, were interested in why there are so many different organizational types, in the context of varying environmental factors, especially uncertainty (Burns and Stalker 1961; Lawrence and Lorsch 1967; for a modern advocacy, see Donaldson 1987). Instead, focus of interest for DiMaggio and Powell was similarities between organizations. Writing in the tradition of institutional theory (Meyer and Rowan 1977), where institutional factors are paramount, they maintained against the contingency theorists that pressures for similarity within an organizational field will prevail, blocking out influences from environmental variation.

National higher education systems are obvious examples of organizational fields. Thus, if the theory of organizational fields holds true, we are likely to see increasing homogenization in higher education systems. But there are also statements to the

contrary. Contingency theory, as already mentioned, is one example. Another, and more specific, is Trow's (1974) thesis that in the transition between 'elite' and 'mass' higher education, typical of modern countries in the post-war period, there is a strong pressure for differentiation (see also Clark 1983; and for a recent overview, Teichler 1988). On purely theoretical grounds, then, it would seem that we can derive two contradictory statements about the development of higher education systems. The question which is the right one can only be settled by empirical examination.

Lynn Meek, whose article in the present issue has inspired me, points out that subject-oriented differences between academic disciplines tend to weaken (but not destroy) homogeneity in higher education organizational fields. I would like to broaden this idea somewhat and take it beyond the scope of disciplinary divergence, considering other possible sources of pluralism as well (Teichler 1988). In brief, I hold that some pressures for similarity probably emanate from the organizational field; yet variations in the field will in all likelihood also encourage disparity. Thus, different organizations face different segments of the organizational field, variations of which cannot be *a priori* ruled out. The outcome of these contrary tendencies when similarity is identified as 'coercive isomorphism' (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) – i.e., based on force, not imitation or values, the other two causes of isomorphism – will be the theme of the present article, dealing with four principal aspects in a major transformation of Sweden's system of higher education.

### **The case of Sweden: a preview**

In Sweden as in many other countries, student numbers grew very rapidly in the decades following the Second World War. Net first-time enrolments for higher education in 1945 totalled 2,650. In 1968, the peak year, it had risen to more than 30,000. Although naturally a variety of factors was influential, increased supply of students from the secondary schools explains about two thirds of the change (Premfors and Östergren 1978). The overall expansion of the Swedish system of higher education is shown in Table 1.

As can be seen from Table 1, after the initial strong expansion in the immediate post-war period, growth rates fell during the early fifties. They started increasing again during the late fifties and culminated in the late sixties. During the same period, the graduate sector underwent a parallel and even stronger expansion (Lane and Fredriksson 1983). According to Trow (1973), the transition from elite to mass higher education takes place when about 15 per cent of the relevant age group is enrolled. With this criterion, the transition occurred in Sweden in the late sixties (Premfors and Östergren 1978).

In the expansion of the sixties, universities and especially their so-called *free sector* (also termed *free* or *philosophical faculties*) were over-represented. The free sector comprised the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. It lacked *numerus clausus*, and only required secondary education for admission.

A parliamentary committee on university education was set up in 1955 to suggest

Table 1. Expansion of the Swedish system of higher education 1945–1980

Year	(A) Total population	(B) Number of students enrolled in the system	B A	Growth rate of (B)
1945	6,674	17,481 <sup>a</sup>	0.0026	
1950	7,041	29,209	0.0041	67
1955	7,235	34,562	0.0048	18
1960	7,495	47,605	0.0064	38
1965	7,767	80,406	0.0104	69
1970	8,043	149,973	0.0186	89
1975	8,222	129,120	0.0157	-14
1980	8,317	158,280	0.0190	23

<sup>a</sup>Nurses' schools not included.

Source: Lane and Fredriksson 1983.

institutional measures for expanding the higher education sector, and especially for the philosophical faculties. Measures eventually taken in the early sixties included access limitations; strictly organized study programmes within the philosophical faculties; and a new 'university lecturer' position, based on a full-time teaching and no research content.

Under increasing pressures from interest groups to regulate the situation and accommodate the system to broad socio-economic needs, a new parliamentary committee was set up in 1968. The committee's 1973 report, after prolonged resistance from an 'unholy coalition' of academic and leftist groups, provided the basis for launching in 1977 a thorough reform of the country's system of higher education. An ideology of rationalistic social engineering permeated the reform, quite in the spirit of the previous decade.

Higher education was to become more available for students from families without study traditions and for regions far from a university. For this purpose, the access system was reformed, introducing the 'famous' 25:5 rule, allowing people of at least 25 years of age, having at least 5 years of work experience, to enter the university without having completed secondary schooling.

Copying the faculties of technology and medicine, regulated study programmes leading to professional fields were introduced into the faculties of social sciences and humanities. These programmes were supplemented by separate courses which could be studied singly or in combinations.

New institutions were formed by merging several 'higher education units' into one, or by building up entirely new units in various parts of the country, distant from the universities.

While most other comparable countries have a binary higher education system, in Sweden practically all post-secondary education now was integrated into a unitary system. Training of, for example, nurses and pre-school teachers that used to be part of the secondary school system, now was included in the higher education system and was explicitly stated to build on a scientific basis like traditional academic education. One intention behind this unitary system was to reduce status differences

between different types of study programmes as well.

Institutional re-structuring also took the form of new organizational sub-units – programme committees for the study programmes and faculty boards for research. An additional hierarchical level, the regional boards, was invented for supervising the new institutions situated outside the traditional university cities. New categories of members – laymen, union representatives, students – were introduced in the various bodies.

In what follows, we will describe all these developments in more detail, covering both process and structural aspects. Two sections will deal with the main processes: access and instruction. Two further sections will contain analyses of central structural matters: institutional classification and organizational structure. The process-structure division is, of course, relative, not absolute: as will be seen, the processes are structured in various ways; conversely, the structures contain processes.

### Access

Experiments with the 25:5 system had begun already in 1960 (Premfors 1980). The purpose was egalitarian. Traditionally, the only gateway to higher education was an exam (the *studentexamen*) from the secondary school (the *gymnasium*). Where a *numerus clausus* was in effect, access was simply based on marks in the exam; in the so-called ‘free faculties’ (social sciences and liberal arts), the exam in itself sufficed. The *studentexamen*, however, always was surrounded by an elitist aura (visually manifested in the white ‘students’ caps’, worn after the successful passing of the exam). The 25:5 rule was intended to broaden access to new groups lacking the formal qualification of secondary school exams. The radically egalitarian intention is well expressed in a statement made in 1970 by the then Minister of Education, Ingvar Carlsson (now Sweden’s Prime Minister), critically commenting upon the previous higher education policy:

*Today, we select those best fitted for education. Tomorrow those who are worst off will be given this chance* (Lindensjö 1981: 108.).

The 25:5 system was gradually expanded until, in the reform of 1977, it gained a general status under the slight reduction to ‘25:4’, i.e., 25 years of age and four years of work experience (Premfors 1980).

Henceforth, all applicants to higher education were assigned to four quota groups:

1. Students from the three or four year gymnasium.
2. Students from the two year gymnasium.
3. Students from ‘people’s high schools’.
4. Students with at minimum 25 years of age and 4 years of occupational experience.

Allocations were made proportionally for the four quota groups. Occupational experience counted in groups 1-3 as well (but only for 80 per cent of the applicants in groups 1-2). 50 per cent of admitted students from group 4 must be 'pure' 25:4s, without a *gymnasium* leaving certificate.

In sharp contrast to the earlier simple admission on the basis of the *gymnasium* leaving certificate, the 1977 reform bill introduced a rather elaborate rule structure for weighting within and between the different quota groups.

The intention behind the 25:5/4 admission system was to increase equality in higher education by broadening access. Did it succeed or fail? That depends on what is meant by 'success'. In the first place, a reasonable assumption is that effects should be substantial, not insignificant. If resulting advances towards increased equality were to be only tiny, then the reform would be cost-inefficient. One can always argue where the exact line should be drawn between significant and insignificant increases, but the principle is clear. In the second place the reform should not be counter-productive, i.e., it should certainly not lead to *decreases* of equality. Let us, therefore, as two combined criteria of success use: (a) significant increases of equality; and (b) no decreases of equality.

There is general consensus among researchers that, though there were *some* steps in the direction of more equality, these were too slight to base a 'success' story upon. More precisely, during 1969-77 when the 25:5 rule was in full effect in the philosophical faculties, social background equality (students from upper, middle, lower class) *decreased*; though it has been pointed out that had it not been for the 25:5 rule, the decrease might have been greater. Between age groups, there were, as one would have expected, considerable gains in equality. On the other hand, the reform was in one respect clearly counter-productive. Thus, equality between sexes declined.

The new rules had some unexpected consequences. In the most sought-after educational fields (such as medicine) the system did not especially favour non-*gymnasium* applicants, but rather medium-low achievers in terms of *gymnasium* marks, with some subsequent higher education counting for additional scores. That is to say, if an applicant had failed to enter an attractive field, he (in the typical case a 'he') could always start a less competitive course, gain the sufficient amount of scores, and switch over to the originally desired one. Disfavoured groups included 'high achievers, women, and the generation coming directly from the *gymnasium*' (Lane and Fredriksson 1983: 86). In other words, the male, upper-middle class structure of these educational fields did not change; on the contrary, it was reinforced, as older, mediocre, and male upper-middle class students were favoured by the new admissions system.

Major goal conflicts included (Kim 1979):

- Widened access vs retained quality.

Analyses show that the new groups of students have severe difficulties relating to lack of study experience and techniques. Working life experience does not seem to compensate for these deficiencies. The number of points obtained by 25:5s declined sharply in the period 1969/70-1975/76. The same decline of perform-

ance was witnessed generally in the philosophical faculties (Lane and Fredriksson 1983: 86-88).

– Homogeneity vs differentiation.

The intention behind the new admission rules was to broaden access at the same time as the educational structure was transformed from elite homogeneity to populist homogeneity. This is in contradiction to Trow's (1973) concept of the development from elite to mass university with concomitant differentiation of instruction, and spells out an in-built conflict in the system; differentiation appearing to be something of a prerequisite for mass universities because of variations in students' background training. Yet as we have seen, differentiation, impossible to suppress since it is an organic part of the system, instead turns up unexpectedly in the shape of increased inequality – which is of course quite the reverse of the reform intentions.

### Instruction

The traditional academic education was structured on a terms basis. The principle was one term-one credit. In the normal case, a subject had three levels, corresponding to three credits. The Bachelor exam (*fil kand*) was based on six credits. Certain combinations were recommended, especially for the education of teachers and state officials. Otherwise, in the philosophical faculties, one was free to study any subjects in whatever combination, as many as one wanted, and for any length of time. The model was a liberal arts education. In the other university faculties, and in the professional schools' education, curricula were more firmly structured with fixed orders of courses and restricted choice.

In the 1960s, when the philosophical faculties expanded out of hand, authorities began to see the loose structure of their curricula as one of the main underlying causes. Gradually, the idea gained acceptance that the expansion problem must be solved by modelling the education of the philosophical faculties on those of the academic professional schools. The labour market situation also had to be kept in mind; demand for teachers, traditionally the main output of the philosophical faculties, was lagging ominously behind the growing supply (Lane and Fredriksson 1983: 175 ff.)

In 1965 the government entrusted the UKÄ (the University Chancellor's Agency) with the task of investigating the possibility of a fixed curriculum for the philosophical faculties. The agency appointed a special commission for the purpose. It was given the name of UKAS – according to critics a bureaucratic joke in very bad taste, since the word *ukas* meant an imperial edict in Tsarist Russia. This little piece of arrogance did not fail to raise the spirits. In 1967, UKAS delivered its report, which was immediately met with violent protests from radical students and conservative professors alike. The opposition was so fierce that the government delayed the implementation of the reform for a year, fearing student unrest; in fact some student revolts did break out in spring 1968. The UKAS proposition was a prime contributor to this unrest, also stimulated by the international turmoil on the

universities in that eventful year.

The UKAS proposition was finally implemented in 1969. In the 1977 reform it underwent some restructuring, while the main idea of a fixed curriculum for the philosophical faculties was preserved. Without delving into the intricacies of differences between UKAS and the 1977 system, we shall simply describe the latter, the chief characteristics of which were:

- A fine-grained one week-one point structure is substituted for the previous one term-one credit structure.
- At the more aggregate level, the central concept of the system is the *study programme*. These are of various lengths, from 40 to 220 points. (40 points correspond to one year.)
- There are *general* study programmes, *local* study programmes, and *individual* study programmes. General study programmes are established at the national level, local programmes by local institutions, and individual programmes by local institutions after proposals from individuals.
- There are also *single courses*, which can be established locally. In part, these function as more flexible alternatives to the fixed study programmes; in part, they fulfil ideals of recurrent education, very prominent in the 1977 reform (Lindensjö 1981).
- The education is geared to labour market needs. All general or local study programmes fall under one of five *occupational sectors*:
  1. Technology.
  2. Administration, economics, and social work.
  3. Medicine.
  4. Teaching.
  5. Cultural work and information.

It is possible for students to avoid the programme structure by combining several single courses into the wished-for number of points. However, the practice is rare because of uncertainty emanating from the complicated admissions system; students have to apply for admission to every new course, and they can never be sure of gaining access, among other things since lottery plays an important part. Single programmes, on the other hand, have to be fixed in advance, and *in toto* by students, making this practice, too, rather impracticable.

Finally, it should be noted that differentiation was *not* a prime goal of the new structure. Rather, homogeneity was the overall objective.

Main dysfunctions of the 1977 education structure include (Bauer 1986; Bladh 1983):

*Many dropouts.* Contrary to expectations, the new educational structure did not lead to an increased flow through the system, although this was the main reason for the change. Quite the reverse occurred: the number of dropouts in the philosophical faculties actually *increased*. The reform engineers had based their idea of a fixed curriculum upon the high-status professional schools, which had a pass-rate of over

85 per cent, in some cases over 95 per cent, as compared to 50 per cent in the philosophical faculties (Lane and Fredriksson 1983). Evidently they had been mistaken; the fixed curriculum was not the reason for the high pass-rate, but rather the fact that the students were already certain about their careers – which was not the case in the philosophical faculties.

*Education for specialists rather than generalists.* New technologies and fluctuating markets make the economy even more unpredictable and volatile. In this situation it would certainly seem better in most cases to educate generalists rather than specialists, since specialized knowledge rapidly grows obsolete. Higher education should develop the students' general problem-solving, analytical, critical, and creative competence, as well as convey broad knowledge related to the field. Special competence, on the other hand, is best conveyed by on-the-job-training.

*Lack of advanced studies.* The emphasis of the system has come to rest more and more upon basic courses, whereas more advanced education has dwindled. This is serious in itself, and it also has adverse effects for research, since advanced studies are the basis for research.

*Exaggerated uniformity.* Despite its overall tendency towards uniformity, the 1977 system had some inbuilt mechanisms for flexibility. Local institutions, however, to a large extent have refrained from using these mechanisms. The reason seems to be that they follow the law of least resistance. Individual study programmes, for instance, are complicated and time-consuming to cope with, and so there is a generally restrictive attitude towards them.

*Complex and inert planning processes.* The reform was supposed to lead to simpler planning; instead, the reverse has happened. While planning at the national level may have become somewhat easier, the opposite is the case locally. The system is too unwieldy to survey for the local institutions, not to speak of single students. Yet, one of the justifications of the 1977 reform was exactly the need to make the system simpler, and easier to survey.

*A conflict between the programme structure and the departmental structure.* After the reform there has been increased concern over the fate of research in the new structure. In the heyday of radical egalitarianism when the reform was prepared, decision-makers at most paid lip-service to research. The present worries might seem a bit late in the day. Surely, if one smashes the working research organization (the faculties), re-arranges pregraduate instruction to serve bureaucratic needs rather than those of knowledge, degrades the universities to colleges (see below), and separates the position of teacher from that of researcher – then what is to be expected?

Thus, the rationally conceived homogeneity of instruction, as envisaged by central authorities, clearly was contrary to the contextual demands. Education was strait-



jacketed into a standardized arrangement which was counter-productive to its actual needs. Hence the occurrence of dysfunction, in effect a sort of informal differentiation, squeezing out at every seam.

### Classification of institutions

Before 1977, a ternary division was operative in Swedish higher education institutions. The categories were:

1. Academic units: universities.
2. Academic units: professional schools (*högskolor*).
3. Non-academic professional schools.

Whereas the first two categories were responsible to national authorities, the non-academic professional schools (vocational schools) fell under regional or local government administration. Students in the third category comprised 15-20 per cent of the total (Premfors 1980). With the exception of the very highly regarded Stockholm School of Economics, private institutions of higher education in Sweden were, and are, of little consequence.

Before 1977, of *högskola* meant a non-university institution of higher education, i.e. an academic institution without all the faculties necessary for a university. Thus, the academic professional schools were *högskolor*; but also 'Stockholms högskola', before it became a university in 1960. In the 1977 reform, the term was redefined to mean 'institution for higher education', imposing the concept of *högskola* on the whole structure. Not only were the non-academic professional schools raised to academic status, but the universities were henceforth to be named *högskolor*, which they naturally perceived as a degradation. The literal translation of *högskola* is high school. (The terminology has had the unfortunate consequence of university students talking of 'going to school'.) There is no good translation that catches the Swedish meaning of the word. 'College' is somewhat related to it but does not quite agree with the Swedish semantics. Perhaps 'higher education school' would catch all the pre- and post-1977 nuances.

The 1977 reform effected a unitary system, wherein all institutions became *högskoleenheter* (literally 'high-school units', or, more freely translated, higher education units). The principle was simple: all institutions in a geographical location should form one unit. Exceptions were granted for Stockholm (five units, including the very prestigious institutes for high-status medical and technical education) and for Gothenburg (two units). The neatness of this scheme, however, was disrupted by the eight disobedient arts schools in Stockholm, that stubbornly refused to be integrated into a higher unit.

Within the system, informal distinctions operate, based upon two dimensions: research facilities, and professional training vs broader educational commitments. See Figure 1.

*The universities.* Among these, there is a differentiation in status, in its turn based on age; the oldest universities being the most prestigious. Three sub-categories can be discerned, from the oldest to the newest universities:

- 1a. The universities of Uppsala and Lund (founded in 1477 and 1688, respectively).
- 1b. The universities of Stockholm (1877) and Gothenburg (1891).
- 1c. The universities of Umeå (1964) and Linköping (1976).

*The institutes.* Pre-1977 professional, academic schools, such as The School of Technology in Stockholm, The Caroline Institute of Medicine in Stockholm, and The University of Agriculture in Uppsala, are high-status institutions, by no means less prestigious than the universities, *just different* because of their specialization, lending them a certain elite nimbus.

*Regional higher education units.* These are non-research institutions that grew from former university branches or vocational schools in smaller cities. Examples are the regional *högskolor* of Halmstad, Sundsvall-Härnösand, etc. In each of the six higher education regions, they played the role of smaller 'satellite universities', grouped around a larger centre university. (With the eventual abolishment of the regional boards, the formal satellite status has gone; yet informally, some threads to the centre universities still remain.)

*Vocational schools.* This is a residual category, consisting of the eight schools of art in Stockholm, which stubbornly fought for their independence, resisting integration into the university.

		Instruction	
		Broad	Professional (specialized)
Research facilities	Yes	1 Universities	2 Institutes
	No	3 Regional higher education units	4 Vocational schools

Fig. 1. Informal institutional structure.

Thus, if we disregard the marginal fourth category, the pre-1977 formal ternary classification survived after 1977 as an *informal ternary classification*. During the process, however, the third member had undergone some transformations in that vocational schools in the university cities were swallowed up by the universities, and former university branches in smaller cities, now made autonomous, became new elements.

With regard to status, the first two categories are on a par, while the members of the third category are placed a bit lower down in the hierarchy.

Finally, it should be noted that the very prestigious Stockholm School of Economics, which many would place on the top of the status hierarchy, was not included in the system. (Otherwise it would have belonged to category 2.) It remained private.

Main goals of the 1977 institutional division were (Jansson 1983):

1. Better adaptation to external demands.
2. Better planning and management.
3. Better cost-efficiency.
4. Furtherance of the reform goals.

As Jansson (1983) concludes in his analysis, these goals were hardly fulfilled by the new division of units. As to the first goal, there is no reason to suppose that big units should be more adaptable to the environment than small ones. Moreover, in empirical comparisons between units of various size, it was rather the smaller ones that tended to show up as more adaptable. Planning and management in some cases did improve, but this could be related only to a very small extent to the institutional rearrangement; other factors were more important. Increases in cost-efficiency were generally judged as quite insignificant. Finally, insofar as the reform goals were promoted by the institutional division, indications are they would probably have been as much promoted without it.

### **The organizational setting**

In order to implement and manage this far-reaching reform programme, the whole organization of universities and colleges had to be extended and thoroughly transformed. An important aspect of the reform, therefore, was organizational change. New organizational units were constructed and new categories of members were introduced in the various bodies. The statutes explicitly ordained the new units to function as *planning* vehicles. The reform bill never spelled out the form of this supposed planning, but from the preparatory works it was clear that some sort of technocratic *ethos* was envisioned. The planning in question had two aspects: economic planning, or budgeting, and non-economic planning, or task planning.

The 1977 reform introduced '*regional boards*', thus inserting a new level in the administrative hierarchy. The country was divided into six higher education regions, each one of which was to cover one or several counties and have a university town as

'regional capital'. As was mentioned before, besides the central university, each region contained several smaller 'satellite universities'. Because of their lack of permanent research staff, these have often been compared – especially by critics – to colleges; yet their level of education, training, and curricula was no different from that of the traditional universities. The regional boards were chiefly entrusted with the task of planning higher education on a regional basis.

In the local organization, laymanization (or corporatism) became a salient feature. The university boards henceforth were to be composed of five kinds of representatives from: (1) the Office of the President; (2) public interest; (3) professors, employed at the university; (4) unions at the university; and (5) students. The boards were to function as overall planning bodies for their respective universities. They had their roots in interim boards.

Also, new organizational units were the 'programme committees'. Hitherto, at the level above the departments, faculties had administered research, and graduate as well as undergraduate education. The 1977 reform assigned responsibility for research and graduate training to 'faculty boards', while planning of the undergraduate instruction became the task of the programme committees. The latter were composed of four categories: teachers, students, representatives from relevant occupational sectors ('working life representatives'), and, lastly, representatives of the technical/administrative staff.

### *The regional boards*

The regional boards were entrusted with basically two functions: (1) decentralization (of single courses); and (2) 'research connection' of undergraduate instruction in institutions lacking permanent research facilities.

As to the first goal, Månsson and Sköldberg (1979a) in their investigation of regional boards showed that decentralization was difficult to obtain. Due to scarcity of resources, new courses in the periphery of regions could only be taken from the existing supply. In other words, they had to be redistributed from the regional centres. But this implied a redistribution of teaching personnel – which collided with the Swedish law of job security. Regarding the second goal, resources granted for research connection were so scant that they inevitably were spent on rather ephemeral, short-run activities. The conclusion of Månsson and Sköldberg (1979a) was that national authorities either had to provide the regional boards with sufficient resources, or else abolish them. As it was, they functioned as a superfluous bureaucratic level, inviting a comparison with the proverbial mountain that bred a mouse.

### *Programme committees and university boards*

Planning of undergraduate education was the primary task of the programme committees, as spelled out in their legal statutes. Månsson and Sköldberg (1979b) in

their comparative case study investigation found that while in some of the cases planning according to pre-set goals was an integrative part, others were not planning bodies at all, in any sense of the word, but rather '*laissez faire*' types. Moreover, one of the units was in the process of passing from a state of *laissez faire* to planning via policy discussion. Still another could not be fairly described as either planned or *laissez faire*, but routine seemed a suitable designation.

The existence of goals, a prerequisite for planning (Cyert and March 1963; Steiner 1969), became of central interest, as did eventually the related issue of strategic scope. Månsson and Sköldbberg (1983) in their enlarged study of the reform-induced transformations of programme committees and university boards (for the latter, see also Månsson and Sköldbberg 1980a) therefore focused on why some of the units, rather than others, ended up in a state of planning. In some cases, structurally identical 'twins' displayed completely different developmental histories.

In order to account for these facts, Månsson and Sköldbberg developed a typology of 'planning cultures'. They can be described briefly and somewhat inaccurately as follows. Type I, generative planning culture, is inspirational, visionary, entrepreneurial, and charismatic. Type II, collegial, is flexible, evolutionary, non-hierarchical, and organic. Type III, technocracy, is rationally goal-driven, hierarchic, and mechanistic. Type IV, routine, is rule-driven, hierarchic, standardized, and formalized. Type V, red-tape, is dysfunctional bureaucracy with isolation and ritualism, poor service and inertia. Type VI, organized anarchy, has unclear goals, unclear means, fluid participation and weak leadership. Type VII, anomie, has dissolution of norms, perceptions of powerlessness, lack of priorities, and apathy.

The typology integrates and develops prominent classifications of organizations, such as those of the Aston group (Pugh and Hickson (1976), Pfeffer (1981), Mintzberg (1983), and Miller and Friesen (1984)).

The types were ordered from I to VII from highest to lowest with respect to *strategic scope*. By this concept is meant the organization's power of consciously moulding its activities in order to cope with problems from the environment. To begin with, goal-driven organizations (I, II, III) represent a higher level of strategic scope than *laissez faire* organizations (V, VI, VII). Second, the rule-driven pure bureaucracies (IV) come in-between these two major classes, being neither goal-driven nor *laissez faire*.

Third, among the goal-driven types I, II, III, there are internal differences pertaining to the character of their goals. Thus, classical rational planning (III) allows less scope than flexible planning (II), since the latter puts into question even underlying problems and values. Visionary, transformative planning (I) allows the most scope of all (Ansoff 1979; Faludi 1973). Fourth, among the *laissez faire* types V, VI, VII, even dysfunctional bureaucracy (V) allows more structuring of activities than organized anarchy (VI), whereas anomie (VII) allows less, implying the general dissolution of norms.

There were also transitional cases. Some of the organizational units studied had entered a state of limited policy discussion between type VI, organized anarchy and type II, collegial; others were in the process of a more global policy discussion between type VII, anomie and type I, generative.

Instead of the cumbersome 'type of organization, ordered according to strategic scope', the term *planning culture* (abbreviated as p-culture) was used. This is in accordance with traditional usage – at least that of the classics. Burns and Stalker (1961: 119, 258), for instance, explicitly named their types 'cultures'. Weber (1969) strongly emphasized 'meaning' as the element pervading all organizations, including the types he analyzed (understanding that meaning is, of course, the central business of culture studies, e.g., Geertz 1973.)

The empirical cases – programme committees and university boards – were spread over almost all the spectrum of types just discussed: collegial organization, technocracy, routine, red-tape, organized anarchy, and anomie. *In other words, instead of the single 'planning' mode (type III, technocracy), as formally envisioned by the reform engineers, six different informal planning cultures and two transition states actually turned up.*

It is not easy to discern any common pattern to these changes. For instance, only three out of twelve cases ended up in the technocratic p-culture (type III). This is in stark contrast to classical theories of organizations, above all concerned with type III, rationality and efficiency (Pfeffer 1982). If we compare the five units starting in routine, for instance, two moved into technocracy, one into anomie, one into the collegial type, and one remained in routine. Especially intriguing is why the two very similar teachers' programme committees should differ so radically in their transformations. Out of the three economists' programme committees, originating in anomie, organized anarchy, or a combination of the two types, two remained in the same state, whereas the third moved from organized anarchy to anomie, and then went on to a global policy discussion. What made so similar organizational units develop so differently? Why did some units transform into other organizational types, whereas others remained the same?

The differences could eventually be accounted for by the following matrix (Figure 2), where the planning cultures are in the cells, and uncertainty and demands from the (outer and inner) environment figure as determinants. The split boxes represent policy crises (policy discussions or policy collapses) in transitions between planned and *laissez faire* cultures. (It should be pointed out that the matrix is not a 'contingency' one, since it is quite compatible with both strategic choice and natural selection as well [Månsson and Sköldbberg 1983].) The theory has strong support from existing theory. In the first place, consider the vertical dimension of the matrix. As we go from 'south' to 'north' in the matrix, bureaucratization increases. There is overwhelming evidence from contingency studies as well as small group research that less uncertainty is generally associated with more bureaucratic (formalized, hierarchic, etc.) types. This is possibly the most verified hypothesis in organization theory.

And the other, horizontal dimension? There is evidence from the literature that rising environmental *demands* (stress, illiberality, challenge) stimulate the organization to generate new goals (Child 1972; Donaldson 1987; Pfeffer 1981: 323-326), hence planning. This is very reasonable, if we recognize that rising demands (stress, etc.) sooner or later necessitate priorities – which is only another word for goals. Naturally, the demands must not be too high, or the organization will suffer and

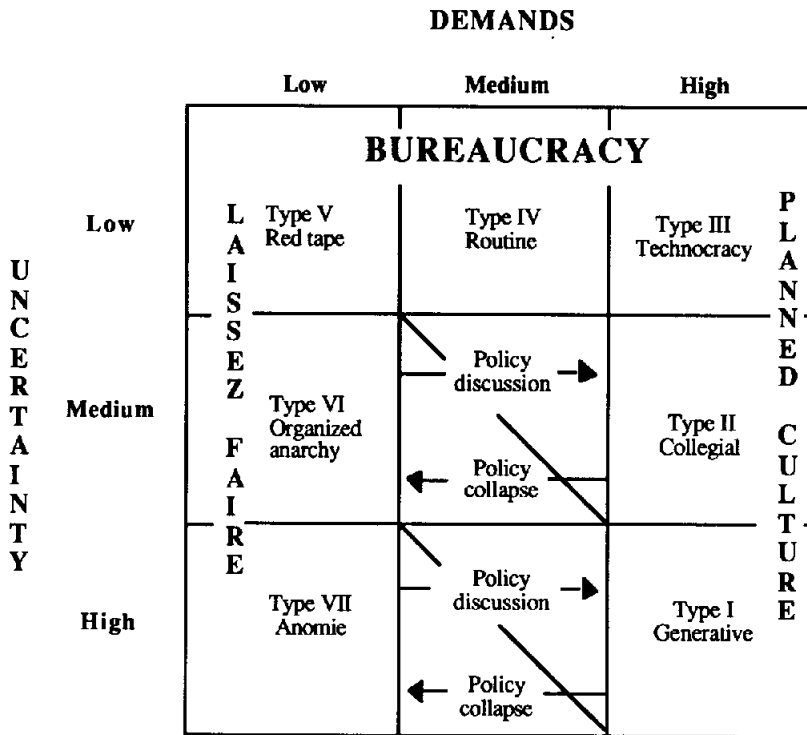


Fig. 2. The seven planning cultures, uncertainty, and demands.

eventually perish (see Selye 1974, for 'eustress' as contrasted to 'distress'; March and Simon 1958, for 'optimal stress'). Environmental demands almost always constitute the driving force behind policy discussions (Katz and Kahn 1966: 308-309). Uncertainty and demands are generators of planning (March and Simon 1958: 185-186; Shani 1974.)

Moreover, a number of specific - and classical - findings of strategic change seems to confirm the theory (see Månsson and Sköldberg 1983):

- Routinization of charisma (Weber 1969) under decreasing uncertainty.
- Transformations between an entrepreneurial type and bureaucratic types under diminishing uncertainty (Ansoff 1979 from strategically discontinuous behaviour to budgetary behaviour; Greiner 1972; Kets de Vries 1980; Miller and Friesen 1984; Schumpeter 1961).
- Transformations between mechanistic and organic organizations, associated with low and higher uncertainty, respectively (Burns and Stalker 1961; Lawrence and Lorsch 1967).
- Organized anarchies, developing under conditions of uncertainty (under the name of ambiguity, March and Olsen [eds.] 1976).
- The synthesizing study on organizational life cycles by Cameron and Whetten (1981).

- Deregulation (Durkheim 1966) to anomie under increasing uncertainty.
- The theory of myth-waves (Jönsson and Lundin 1977).

*The departmental level.* Månsson and Sköldberg (1980b) also made a survey study of the departmental level, more precisely the departmental boards. The following pattern emerged:

- The respondents held that all types of planning had become more cumbersome in the new organization.
- Criticism about bureaucratization was endemic.
- Yet, surprisingly, there was little criticism of the *number* of bureaucratic units; the target was their *malfunctioning*, their lack of efficiency.
- The administrative workload had increased after the reform, at the expense of research and instruction.
- The connection between instruction and research was held as crucial; but this connection had been damaged by the reform, contrary to intentions.
- A great majority held that the work situation in the new system was difficult or rather difficult.
- Respondents from older institutions were more critical than those from younger ones; and respondents from the former philosophical faculties were more critical than those from former academic professional fields.

The departments appeared as the real power centres of the local structure. The formal picture of the power flow was the rather conventional 'top-down', from the university board (or its counterpart) *via* the intermediate level (programme committee for education, faculty committee for research) to the basic units, the departments. The informal power structure, however, turned out to be the very opposite. The departments were actually the power units of the system, and higher levels were more or less followers. In effect, then, a sort of 'bottom-up' power flow was operating in the structure. This would seem to favour the picture of subject-oriented basic units, undermining official homogeneity, due to academic disciplinary variation (see Lynn Meek's article in the present volume).

There is reason to agree with Lane and Fredriksson (1983) when they state that, at least in Sweden, the departmental level, comprising the real power units, has been somewhat overlooked in higher education research. In the last analysis, it is through them that every reform effort will be 'filtered'. Through their representatives, the departments dominate the intermediary levels - the programme committees and the faculty boards - in the institutions as well. There is a strong tendency for these units to function as 'rubber stamps' on decisions already made below.

### **The aftermath**

The 1977 higher education reform was followed up, and its intended and unintended effects were studied in a special five year follow-up programme. Several re-reform



changes have since been decided by parliament or adjusted by practical measures. One of these is currently underway: the admission system is being reformed in a supposedly even more egalitarian direction.

Part of the follow-up programme was a project dedicated to studying the organizational framework. Having completed its task, the project reported its findings in a hearing with the educational committee of the Swedish parliament. Structural adjustments recommended by the project and subsequently established by parliament, included the right of institutions to merge programme committees and faculty boards, and the abolishment of the regional boards.

One of the first policy changes – introducing teaching lecturers in the early sixties – has been one of the last to be reformed, in spite of its unintended but obvious negative impact of separating higher education from research by hindering university teachers from being active researchers. However, in 1984, a reform concerning teaching in higher education was decided by the parliament, suggesting ways of allowing all teachers to share their time in various proportions between research and teaching. This new reform is now also being followed up.

Decentralization was a watchword already in the 1977 reform. The tendency towards favouring local rather than central planning deepened during the next decade. One of the most important trends of the late 1980s consisted in an increased emphasis on decentralization and the concomitant transition from rule-driven to goal-driven institutions. An example of this is the law enacted in 1988 (Prop. 1988/89: 65), through which decentralization of the institutions' economic planning was extended in time as well as scope. Thus the budget period has been extended from one to three years and funding for instruction will no longer come in five different streams destined for each occupational sector, but as a lump sum.

Actually, decentralization seems to be a kind of *Zeitgeist*, not only in the higher education sphere, but generally in society. In the 1950s the corresponding role was played by centralization. So have we finally seen the light now, whereas formerly we were deceived by the power-mad central planners? In fact, organization theory has a number of basic research findings with relevance for the decentralization 'craze':

- There is no single best solution to organization problems.  
This is the result of 'contingency' researchers (classical texts are those by Burns and Stalker 1961; Lawrence and Lorsch 1967; Woodward 1965). What organizational measures we should take depends *on the situation*. As situations vary, so do the solutions.
- Decentralization is generally less cost-efficient than centralization.  
Since decentralization means more organizational units, more meetings, more planning, etc., it is, *ceteris paribus*, less cost-efficient than centralization. Since we are faced with increasing scarcity of resources, this is, or should be, a serious consideration.
- Decentralization may very well lead to more bureaucracy.  
There is nothing that, *ipso facto*, makes decentralization less bureaucratic. On the contrary, we may very well have a flourishing of *local* bureaucracies, and bureaucratization. One may of course raise the question whether the transition to

local institutional goal-planning does not make for less bureaucratization. The answer is that it is not enough just to say 'local goal-planning' in order for it to happen. If it occurs or not depends on local institutional conditions, and these, unfortunately, are not taken into account.

## Conclusion

In effect, 'decentralization' has so far functioned as a label for what is really a bureaucratization of Swedish higher education. Standardization and homogeneity are characteristics of that development – far from the diversified structure that would have been expected in the development from elite to mass higher education, according to Trow (1973) and Clark (1983). Yet, reality, as so often, has eluded the lofty vision of the social engineers.

If we look at the four main areas presented here – access, instruction, institutional classification, and organizational framework – it is clear that homogeneity is only formal and superficial, in reality detrimental to the system. Informally, differentiation, being forbidden from the main entrance but impossible to keep out, seeps in through the back-door:

- *Admission* – in the form of increased inequality instead of official equality.
- *Instruction* – in the form of serious dysfunctions.
- *Institutional classification* – as a ternary system instead of a unitary one.
- *The organizational framework* – as a variety of planning cultures instead of a single one.

In all four areas, the processes or structures face varying contextual segments within the same organizational field. In admission, different categories of students are met with. In instruction, different kinds of education are encountered. In institutional classification, institutions differ widely in educational specialization and research facilities. Finally, in the organizational framework, differences in the strength and nature of environmental problems show up.

Theoretically, the 'isomorphism' of organizational fields that DiMaggio and Powell (1983) speak about still holds. But it is an isomorphism of a *variegated* organizational field; an isomorphism at a deeper level, making the organizations involved differ, but differ according to an underlying pattern of similarity and differences. (A corresponding picture of 'deeper' isomorphism was also noted in a recent study of local and regional government in Sweden [Sköldbörg 1991].)

It would seem as though much of the difficulties presently besetting the Swedish system of higher education stem from efforts from politicians and administrators to force the system into a rational planning straitjacket – as symbolized by the term *högskola* – whereas the system itself by its inherent forces would rather tend in the opposite direction, that of diversification and flexibility. In other words, what we now witness in the case of Sweden is a *conflict between a politico-ideological level of external decisions and a socio-economic level of systemic demands*. This appears to be

the core contradiction in the Swedish system of higher education. In fact, differentiation functions much as a sort of repressed, collective consciousness under a rigid, rational and formal super-ego.

In terms of our planning cultures, politicians and administrators have tried to force the whole system from the rule-driven type IV to the goal-driven type V bureaucracy. But the different degrees of uncertainty and demands in the various sub-systems make these efforts unrealistic, and unfit for the real situation. In fact, the transition from rule-driven to goal-driven bureaucracy would seem to match only low-uncertainty cases, under increasing demands. These, however, appear to be in the minority, and in many cases more flexible medium to high-uncertainty types like the collegial type VI or even the generative type VII will be more adjusted to the actual situation. Hence, a more differentiated approach is called for. A high-tech knowledge enterprise, a service enterprise, or even a classical, visionary *entrepreneur*, will in many cases serve as a better root metaphor than the steel mill or conveyor belt factory that has thus far been the only – and mostly misleading – image of higher education.

In the present technocratic culture, students are given the role of passive units on the conveyor belt. In the production process the teachers-workers are expected to refine the students into ready-made, standardized products. In another planning culture, students might be raised to the role of clients (Melin 1983) – or why not temporary co-workers. The product would not then be ‘refined students’, but *knowledge*. Then one would also avoid the ‘schoolification’ that is presently plaguing the system in the wake of the *högskolereform*. Most teachers have no time for research.<sup>1</sup> And in the instruction, students are so geared to ‘taking points’ that interest in knowledge and criticism disappears; there is no time for it. A characteristic symptom is that Swedish university students now in all seriousness talk of ‘going to school’, taking part in ‘classes’, etc.

To sum up, rationalist planners have treated the Swedish system of higher education as a transparent, non-resistant medium, into which a uniform technocratic planning culture should simply be infused. This is almost a textbook case of what DiMaggio and Powell (1983) term ‘coercive isomorphism’. However, the system seems to function more like a prism, refracting the incoming light into various colors. Efforts to make the outcome light monochrome by force only succeed in blurring and distorting the issue. Any change needs to take into consideration the internal workings of the system, its various components and their contexts. These are different, not homogeneous. Actually, even the very term ‘system’ might be dangerously misleading, suggesting an arrangement of tightly coupled identical components with a common goal, through which impulses can be transmitted without change or delay. But this, as we have seen, is not the case.

For these reasons, the discussion on the quality of education has been prominent in the 1980s. We may note, however, that the same discussion has taken place in the USA, in spite of, or rather because of, the strong tradition of diversity in that country (Teichler 1988). So, if a uniform model is maladjusted to the variegation of the real world, maybe ‘anything goes’ is not a good solution either. What is needed seems to be a pluralist structure supported by minimum standards as well as

incentives for improving the quality. This could be embodied in some sort of licence procedure, wherein the licence, granted by central authorities, contains stipulations on minimum goals (for instance, quality in education).

In such a *political franchising*, it would be incumbent upon regional authorities to supervise that the licence stipulations are followed, enforcing the stipulations by various sanctions, in the last resort by withdrawing the licence. But they should also have a general supportive function *vis-à-vis* the institutions, including starting-up help for new institutions, counselling, assistance in major purchases, sharing of technical equipment between several institutions, etc. Standards of instruction (and research) could be further increased by stipulating that economic surpluses above a certain rate (as inscribed in the licence) should be used for this purpose, except for a certain percentage, the bonus, to be used for any purpose (e.g., expansion, or personal consumption). This, however, would mean a semi-privatization of part of the public sector, and it may be doubted if the political situation in Sweden is yet ripe for such a solution.

Instead, authorities seem to be heading in the direction of a more cautious 'perestroika', with flexible forms of decentralization, where it is hoped that local initiative, innovation, and creative problem-solving will flourish, inside the fence of a high and equal standard of education.

In closing this article, it should be pointed out that there are several gaps in our knowledge of the Swedish higher education system. More research is needed, especially in the following areas:

- The follow-up programme covered short-to-medium range outcomes of the 1977 reform. Further research should involve long-term effects.
- As indicated above, so far the operative basic units (the departments) have unfortunately been rather neglected. An investigation might take the form of a survey study combined with case studies, giving breadth and depth to the analysis.
- Changes in the wake of the reform, although insignificant compared to it, should also be studied. Their effects do not seem to have quite penetrated to the operative layers. In fact, a working hypothesis might be that they are mostly 'symbolic' or 'pseudo' rather than real changes: an interesting subject for investigation.
- Although instruction, not research, was the main target of the 1977 reform, the plight of the latter should also be dealt with, not least because more and more relative attention has been paid to it by decision-makers and in the general debate.
- Finally, the role of the central higher education agency, the National Board of Universities and Colleges, should be the subject of a special study, since it has so far tended to elude the attention of researchers.

## Note

1. A law is now under way, making part-time research obligatory for all teachers in higher education. The problem, however, is not that teachers are unwilling to do research, but that there are no resources for research. If all academic teachers are to spend half their time upon research, then a large number of additional teachers will have to be employed in order to cover the gaps left in undergraduate instruction. The resources for this simply do not exist; neither, in many cases, do the teachers. Hence, the law will probably be mostly symbolic; that is, rather than establishing a certain pattern of action, it points out a desirable state of things that in the real world might possibly be realized in a very small number of cases.

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