

**Working Paper SW1**

**QUALITY ASSURANCE AND EVALUATION POLICY  
BROKERING: VIEWS FROM SWEDEN**

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**DRAFT ONLY: NOT FOR QUOTATION WITHOUT PERMISSION**

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This working paper is focused upon the development of a European policy space for education. It shows how the early concerns for a common cultural identity, involving education, in Europe, and sensitivity towards harmonization of systems have been reshaped by the events of the last ten years, especially the Lisbon process and the integration of data systems.

This paper reports some of the results from an interview study that is part of the international research project “Fabricating Quality in European Education, FabQ.

The aim of this particular sub-study was to study policy brokering of global and European quality assurance and evaluation policy and activities in Sweden. The paper is intended to report on the statements from the informants and does not aspire to any high level of analysis, contextualisation or theoretical agility. That will have to wait. Instead the aim of this paper is mainly to communicate to the other national projects in FabQ what was said in interviews with the national brokers in Sweden. The paper is simply a summary of the collected interview data.

As such, the paper is structured quite close in line with the interview manual developed mainly by the British team, and later translated and modified to fit into the Swedish education context and the Swedish concepts and language. In using the English manual again and the concepts used therein, it may be that a language problem has surfaced (again). So for example, may some of the rubrics in this paper perhaps appear misleading to you. I am aware of a shift of meaning going back and forth between English and Swedish, and a revision is probably necessary in the organisation of this material when I try to make a deeper analysis and relate to the UK and Finnish teams.

In the final part of the paper some comments are made in relation to the four key ideas networks, commensurability and comparison, traditions, and globalisation in Working Paper 3 from the UK team. This is a small start to better understand the Swedish material.

## **The research process so far**

The interviews were conducted throughout the academic year 2006-2007, and by a telephone connected to a tape recorder. So far, the collected interview material consists of taped interviews from eight interviewees. They may be characterised as conversations around a particular subject and directed by the interview manual mentioned above. Notes were also taken during the interviews.

The taped material was listened to all over and all notes were re-read during this listening to add important things that were missed the first time. After that the notes were re-read again and organised to map out the most important features concerning topics derived from the material. This is also the reason why no quotes from the interviews are used in this text. A process like this probably leads to a more coherent picture of Swedish national policy brokering as told by the informants, but risks losing important dissonances and/or ambiguities in the material.

## **The informants and their professional contexts**

The informants were selected from three groups defined to be of importance in national policy brokering of QAE in education by a combined technique of snowballing and strategic sampling. The three groups are:

- civil servants working (or previously working) at the ministry of Education, the assumption being that they know the contemporary history of global and European Union QAE-efforts from a Swedish national political perspective.
- civil servants working at the Swedish National Agency of Education (SNAE). They should be the most knowledgeable when it comes to the national administration and implementation strategies of QAE as well as when it comes to what kind of global and European Union QAE material that is used in the national policy-making and decision-making processes.
- researchers involved in different global and European Union QAE-projects.

It was soon discovered that these categories are blurred and overlapping. This can perhaps be explained by the small number of interviewees, and by the sampling technique. However, since our knowledge was very limited regarding the national policy brokers, we had to rely on other peoples' connections and insights. Drawing on my experience from other interview studies involving national policy makers, I know that civil servants go between the ministries and the national agencies (perhaps more often from the ministry to SNAE than the reversed way), and researchers are ever so often directly involved in policy making processes either as experts or because they also work in the national agencies or in the ministries.

Most of the interviewees are men (two women), high-ranking officers in their respective organisation, and have several have a doctor's degree. Most of them have been working in

this policy domain for several years, which gave the interviews an interesting historical dimension.

## **The significance of QAE in the Swedish, European and global contexts**

As can be expected all persons find QAE activities to be of increased importance, both nationally, in the EU and globally. The most significant organisations for Sweden are the OECD, the EU and the Official co-operation in the Nordic region (Nordiska ministerrådet). UNESCO is also an organisation of weight, but more as recipient of ideas, influences and foreign aid from Sweden.

Sweden has taken part in OECD projects for several decades. The earliest date in the interview material is from middle of the 1970s. Projects and groups that are mentioned are: The International School Improvement Project (ISIP), Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI), Programme on Institutional Management in Higher Education (IMHE), PISA both test groups and steering group, OECD governing board, International Comparisons in Education (INES) steering group, a spin-off network from ISIP; the International Council for School Effectiveness and Improvement (ICSEI). These are the organisations and groups that the Swedish brokers hold highest in esteem for their professional and analytical capacity. PISA is also mentioned by all, for its high impact on national policy, not only in Sweden but in other countries as well, because of the attention media give it.

IEA's tests TIMSS, PIRLS and Civics are also important for Sweden and a more informal international evaluation network called EVA is also mentioned.

As a late member of the EU, Sweden was not particularly sensitive to its education policy efforts in the beginning of the membership. This has changed, and the EU is becoming a more and more prominent part of the Swedish education policy sphere. The early Swedish engagement mostly concerned exchange programmes like Socrates and Leonardo. Sweden has taken part in the Lisbon process and lately been more engaged in the process to develop a "coherent framework of indicators" (disseminated to the EU members for consultation in January said on person). These quality indicators are described as very well anchored in the Swedish government and parliament (at that time, fall 2006). It was said that the indicators fairly well match the goals for Swedish education, and that Sweden has already achieved what was agreed on in the earlier process of common educational goals for Europe. Another example of Swedish engagement is the work with indicators for lifelong learning.

Sweden is now part of EU projects directed at the development of indicators in particular areas, eg foreign languages. Other projects that Sweden partakes in are the European Qualification Framework (the aim being to organise vocational education in Europe into eight levels), and the European Charter Mobility programme.

Most of the informants at the ministry of education bring forward 'the open method of coordination' as an influential method in the work with QAE in European policy on education. This is the European Union's way to govern education policy according to them, and they also seem to think that it is a good strategy. The method is based on voluntary participation and dialogue, a method that has been in operation in Sweden for some decades in governing education (eg as implementation strategy for new reforms). 'Informative' or 'discursive steering' is a concept used by some to capture the essence of the method (Pettersson & Wallin, 199X). The interviewees describe this kind of governing in terms of transparency, comparison, self-assessment and pressure. By open comparison of common quality indicators (EU), test scores (OECD; PISA, IEA; TIMMS, PIRLS) and statistics (eg EUROSTAT), Sweden notices its position in relation to countries that are culturally akin. Such countries become interesting to look closer to when new QAE activities are planned in Sweden. Much of the same rational is used inside Sweden. National statistics, national and local inspection reports, national evaluations, municipal statistics etc. are communicated by the state and by the municipalities themselves, making comparisons easy to do. To look for good examples (best practice) with similar preconditions and transform them in relation to the local context is the road to improvement. Competition is essential in this rational, locally, nationally and globally.

According to most of the interviewed persons, the general aim of the European Union's QAE activities is to promote high quality education in Europe in order to produce and sustain a highly knowledgeable, competent and flexible workforce, so that Europe (and Sweden itself) becomes the most competitive region on the world market. One person however, points to a different direction and emphasises accountability as the major driving force behind QAE activities. It is also worth noticing that Sweden, in the eyes of these persons, does not import, borrow or copy ideas or models from anywhere. Not at all, since the common opinion in the ministry and at the SNAE appears to be that Sweden is already very good at QAE. Actually, some of the interviewees seemed to be a bit annoyed about this lack of interest. On the other hand (as is described below) certain countries are of interest and may inspire Swedish policy-making to a certain degree.

There is however a clear limit to what Sweden will agree to participate in. As an example Sweden does not look keenly on the European Commission's efforts to get support for a common and coordinated education policy throughout the member states. Sweden defends the principle of national sovereignty in the case of education. Education is a national responsibility and the EU should not interfere with that.

My impression from the interviews is that there is a mixed view among civil servants, both at the ministry and at SNAE, regarding what is measured (quality in comprehensive education) and how it is measured. Many point to more generic and non-curriculum-based competences like literacy and mathematical and problem solving ability as the most important ones to foster (and measure). Others bring forward issues of equality, critical thinking and independency as individual traits of consequence in education. Quality in

education defined like that is not easy to test or measure they say at the same time. Whether or not the QAE activities the interviews attribute most significance to really measure what is considered to be most important to promote, eg PISA, all informants are aware of the risk of unintended impact stemming from the QAE activities themselves. Several of the interviewees pointed out the limitations of the international tests like PISA, IEA civics and international statistics with regard to the possibilities to get explanations why some countries come out better than others. But again, the power of comparison and international dialogue is repeatedly underlined as quality in itself.

## **The interrelation and direction of policy influence**

A common feature to almost all QAE activities that occupy these national brokers (PISA, TIMMS, IEA Civics, etc) is that they are based on the measurement of individual pupils, directly linking common indicators and criteria for Europe or the world to the individuals. The test scores are then aggregated so that a measure is produced for larger units like a school, a municipality or a country. Statements on the success or non-success of different nations are then made on the basis of these aggregated data. The informants in this study direct attention to an increased interest from media to report on how Sweden is doing compared to other countries (eg in PISA). Attention and good coverage in national media is said to be highly influential in the national political agenda setting.

It also seems like the Swedish brokers operate at different levels within the EU and in the OECD; in particular identified projects, in the European Commission, in steering groups and general assembly, and in more informal networks. The interviewees were all involved in a number of these groups, networks and formal decision making bodies at the same time. There is obviously also a blend of national politicians, civil servants and scholar/experts in some groups, while other groups /decision-making ones) are strictly for the representatives of either the political or the administrative part of the Swedish state.

As said above, OECD seems to be the most influential international organisation in Swedish policy brokering, but considering the high level of engagement in European Union activities (projects etc.), I think it is fairer to say that both of them are significant and influential. When the interviewees describe more every-day policy-making in Sweden, several sources of data and information are used. There are also efforts to better coordinate national policy on QAE and the engagement vis-à-vis different international and global organisations. Since the same individuals are part of several groups in different organisations and networks, ideas are communicated crosswise making both the EU and OECD policy efforts intertwined.

## **Ideas and spaces of policy learning**

Inspiration for the contemporary Swedish QAE activities are traced by some of the interviewees to names like Urban Dahllöf (professor emeritus in education and in Sweden well known for his efforts to explain educational outcomes by introducing the concept 'frame-factors', like time and group size), Miles, Michael Fullan and Richard Schmuck from the United States and Canada, and David Hargreaves and David Hopkins from England. As I understand the interviewees who put forward these names, these scholars shared an interest in trying to explain the outcomes of education by inquiring about preconditions for education and learning and by studying the actual process. For schools and education systems to improve, such knowledge was thought to be crucial. Nationally influential persons in line with this way of thinking has been Ulf P. Lundgren and Sigbrit Franke, who in the end of the 1970s developed what has been called 'theory-directed evaluation'. Their standpoint was in opposition to the single focus on outcome measures using aggregated test scores at an individual level to evaluate entire education systems.

Another idea of interest that is now integrated in the Swedish national QAE system is dialogue and peer review/external reviewers. This was introduced in the national evaluations of higher education in the end of the 1990s and as a means for school development by, among others, Sigbrit Franke (chancellor of higher education retired in May 2007). She picked it up during a sabbatical in the United States and combined it with theory-directed evaluation into a model of local evaluation and school development. Mats Ekholm and Rolf Lander are two other professors in education who have been influential in this field of evaluation and school improvement in Sweden, also with inspiration from international connections.

In the eyes of the interviewees, Sweden is regarded as a driving force in the EU and the OECD work with QAE in education. The long history of official statistics in Sweden (since the 1700s when it comes to the reading ability of the population), and its long tradition of national systems of controlling public education, are examples given to explain Sweden's strong international position in the policy and practice of QAE.

The importance of the Official co-operation of the Nordic region (Nordiska ministerrådet) is also mentioned by several of the interviewed persons. When Sweden tries to persuade/put pressure on other nations to listen to propositions or to take another policy route, the Nordic allies are valuable and the Nordic alliance makes a powerful actor.

From the interviews it becomes quite clear that the Swedish national policy brokers consider Sweden to do very well on QAE compared to most other countries. Groups of official national education people from other countries frequently visit the Swedish ministry of Education and SNAE to learn more about the Swedish education system as a whole and about its QAE system too. Germany and Asian countries were repeatedly mentioned. The lifelong learning indicators were mentioned as an area in which Sweden has influenced European work with indicators substantially. Even though Sweden is doing well on QAE,

other countries ways of organising particular QAE activities are believed to be of interest for Sweden. Examples given are England and the Netherlands when it comes to inspection, Scotland concerning national tests, Ontario and New Zealand more generally, and Finland due to its PISA success. PISA was also mentioned as a reason for Germany to visit Sweden; their PISA results were shockingly low and Sweden had PISA results that were fairly high and with low variation in range.

## **Relationship to national policy directions**

OECD reports and international statistics are used in the preparation of proposals, new ideas, government bills, but also in preparation for the EU commission meetings, EU project meetings. SNAE does a lot of preparation work leaning on international reports of different kinds (OECD and EU mostly) when laying a ground for Swedish policy on international and national QAE activities. But since Sweden has an intricate web of QAE activities directed at compulsory education, there is also a vast array of national statistics, national test scores, inspection reports, national evaluations, etc., to draw on.

One striking result from the data collected in the interviews is that the direction of QAE policy described by the informants is almost restricted to the national level. The major part of the communication is between the ministry of Education and SNAE. Even though communication with municipalities, teacher's unions, universities, etc. are mentioned as partners in dialogues and as recipients of national policy efforts on quality improvement work, this is apparently a weak spot. My impression is that it is almost as if the impact of QAE activities within Sweden is not an issue. A few studies of the impact of the recently re-installed inspections have however been carried out. The persons from the ministry that I interviewed, were relying on SNAE to disseminate QAE policy, but did not know the results of that.

As has been seen from the presentation above, Swedish national QAE activities are well in line with what is promoted in other nations. However, the national QAE system has been developed for several decades and is composed by a web of evaluative activities, by one informant described as a palette of interrelated activities like national inspection (re-installed 2003, extremely comprehensive and far reaching), national tests (has been ongoing in slightly different forms since the 1960s), national evaluations (a programme was launched in the middle of the 1980s), strengthened municipal audit (now including quality assessment, not only monetary and legal audit), etc. The new government has announced an increase of national testing and focus on assessment of pupils and a continued high level of inspection directed more at assessing the pupils' subject knowledge. (It easy to think of Bush's No Child Left Behind Act and the test industry, but the Swedish national testing system will not (yet) be related to detention, teachers' salary and the contracts of principals, etc. as is the case in the U.S.). These are similar QAE activities that are in operation in other European nations.

## **QAE in the future**

There is a strong belief that QAE is here to stay, at least for 5-10 years. The opinions among the brokers are clearly very diverted, ranging from extremely positive towards QAE and a wish for more of it, to a view that they have become perverted and are suicidal when it comes to educational values and education practice (teach-to-the-test, etc.) Accountability is by one person understood to be the driving force for future QAE, but another informant discusses QAE in terms of the problems associated with governing by objectives/goals and results. This strategy has its shortcomings, but says this person, what strategy can replace it?

## **Networks and communities**

The concept of network and policy community seems highly relevant when trying to understand the way Sweden interacts with the international and global policy spheres. The same persons have been part of this global and international policy arena for quite some time. There is long term engagement both at an individual but also at the national level. Stability and continuity are also fitting descriptors of Sweden's relation to the OECD and the European Union, the latter of course of later date. Compared to Scotland and England and the idea of reciprocity, Sweden seems to be somewhere in between. National data is claimed to be a very important source for education policy and governance. However, in the last years PISA has had an impact on political agenda-setting. Also, Sweden is viewed as a source for other countries to look to because of its exceptional history of statistical data, its technological and analytical capacity, and over all comprehensive web of QAE. QAE has also intentionally been viewed as (and designed to be) part of the governing of education in Sweden since the beginning of the 1990s.

Europeanisation of Sweden seems to operate through the QAE activities and instruments developed in the networks and policy communities, but to what degree is yet to be analysed. Sweden is self-content and appears a bit stubborn and reluctant to whole-heartedly engage in this measurement era. Gender issues, issues of equality, equity and democracy are still promoted by several Swedish national brokers.

## **Commensurability and comparison**

From this summary of the interview material, it is quite clear that the Swedish national brokers stress 'the method of open coordination' as a means to govern, ie to 'do' European education policy, and also global education policy. Sweden's participation in several international tests and international collection of statistics is a fact and the national policy on what to participate in and to what cost seems more coordinated now when the number of international QAE activities have increased.



Transparency, comparison and commensurable measures are also concepts that have been discussed and in use for some time in Sweden, so this idea is not foreign to Swedish policy makers and national civil servants working in the ministry and SNAE.

### **Collective narrative/tradition**

As seems to be the case with England, Sweden is somewhat reluctant to be too much involved in a European Education Policy Space. National autonomy in education policy is stressed and there is apparently a more coordinated policy in how to act and react in relation to international and global policy efforts today compared to 10-15 years ago. This may of course be due to the long period of social democratic governments, and might change now with the new government. The new government has signalled more tests, more efforts to measure academic achievements and more state control of compulsory schooling in general.

I also think that it is safe to say that there exists a Swedish narrative in another respect, and that is the view of Sweden as a very advanced and skilled QAE-nation. The quality of national statistics is considered to be high, the tradition of national systems for quality assurance and assessment have been in operation for a long time compared to many other nations. England and Sweden are a bit alike in this respect.

### **Globalisation**

Swedish brokers put a lot of weight on PISA and how it connects global non-subject-based educational values to national policy making. PISA is widely talked about among national politicians, national civil servants, local politicians, teachers' unions, etc. Media attention today is high and the publication of PISA results is followed by intense public debates. These debates focus on the quality of Swedish compulsory education as a system and fails to see the shortcomings of such tests when it comes to their explanatory power. But what is measured in PISA becomes important in Sweden in that it triggers competition through comparisons. It also activates quick policy action, getting certain issues on the policy agenda fast. Traditional Swedish educational values promoted for several decades, at least in the national rhetoric, like equality, equity, democracy, tolerance, independent and critical thinking, risk being pushed back in favour of easy tested competences/subject knowledge. Also, all reports on educational outcomes based on pupil tests most probably adds to the increased speed of Swedish educational policy making, perhaps in itself increasing the difficulties in governing contemporary public enterprises like education. The number of educational reforms decided (and perhaps implemented?) has never been so high as during the last 15 years (Lundgren, 2000), pointing to the inability of the state to govern successfully. This dilemma is shared by most modern western democracies and is part of globalisation in that respect.

## References

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