

Citizens and Customers: A Changing Swedish Higher Education Student Experience?

Reed T. Curtis and Stefan Ekecrantz, PhD, Stockholm University, Sweden, Contact Info: reed.curtis@edu.su.se

Higher education in Sweden is primarily government funded and Swedish students pay no tuition fees and this, in turn, makes the impact of student satisfaction less consequential compared to other parts of the world. The tax financed model also makes institutions highly independent of other parties, such as parents, private contributors and alumni; however, the institution serves as a public authority and must, by law, work to protect the rights of citizens, in this case their students. At the same time, the Swedish government has recently made several legislative changes that are reshaping the relationship between student service professionals and the students they work with.

Swedish Higher Education is designed to serve the citizens by providing educational opportunity and training to all. Many programs and courses are open to anyone with a high school diploma or equivalent, but grade point averages and Swedish SAT scores determine admission into competitive programs such as law, medicine, psychology, and business. A rather unique aspect of Swedish higher education from an international perspective is that state-owned institutions – i.e. 36 out of 39 universities and colleges – are legally public authorities. That means that many aspects of higher education are governed not only by the Higher Education Law (HL, SFS 1992:1434) and Ordinance (HF, SFS 1993:100), but also many other bylaws and regulations that all public authorities must abide by. From a student perspective, this means that each student has rights protected by the Swedish constitution (RF) and the Administrative Procedure Act (FL, SFS 1986:223). Consequently, the relationship between Swedish students and higher education institutions can be characterized as one between citizens and their government.

Despite having legal obligations, Swedish higher education institutions sometimes fail to live up to the requirements. To some degree, a disconnect exists within the system between the traditional academic cultures and the administrative obligations and roles the institutions must play as formal public authorities. Many researchers and teachers are even unaware of the fact that from a legal standpoint they are public servants and are responsible for protecting student rights. For example, student services professionals and faculty members are legally responsible for reviewing student complaints and concerns; however, do not always do so. Furthermore, students rarely refer to their legal rights and may not be aware of them.

Student unions in Sweden have traditionally helped protect student interests and provided representation when student rights are violated. These student unions have a long history in Swedish higher education and were heavily involved in student protests during the 1960s. Students and their collective unions rallied to legally define students as equal parties in the system and as a result were granted many rights in order to protect their interests. Thus, in a general sense, the Swedish student can be described as a "citizen" and has been, to some degree, similar to a unionized "worker" in a workplace – identities quite different to that of a "customer." For more than a century, membership in a student union helped define what it meant to be a Swedish student. Membership in a union had been mandatory and regulated by law since 1908; however, in 2009, the Swedish parliament voted to change this, and the requirement was abolished in 2010. This move was part of a larger deregulation movement which led to the end of many mandatory and semi-mandatory memberships in Swedish society. Although student unions were made voluntary, the ideals and laws regulating student participation and influence in university governance were maintained, and students are still guaranteed representation on boards and committees across all levels of university governance. However, the main organizations that have traditionally represented and protected student interests are now dependent on a voluntary membership and funding structure.

During a recent interview, staff members of the Stockholm University Student Union indicated the change has been a cause for concern. Since the law change in 2010, membership in the union has decreased each term; however, the demand for union-related support and services has not declined. The union has had to redirect time and efforts away from providing services and towards recruitment activities. Despite receiving some governmental and institutional funding, a significant amount of the union's finances depends on a healthy level of dues-paying members. Since the university and government give funding to the unions, the unions are obligated to support students regardless of their funding or membership levels. In fact, according to a student union staff member, it doesn't matter whether they are a member of the union or not, they are obligated to help all students. The staff member added that it is increasingly "difficult to recruit when we help everyone anyway." Whereas the relationship between higher education and students in Sweden has not been one of customer service, it had been the case between the student union and students. But what happens if the customer can receive the same service without having to pay? This is the question student unions and the students they represent are beginning to ask.

In some cases, the student union is called by the university to provide services often provided by student affairs professionals in other countries. For example, the Stockholm University Student Union hires, trains, and manages several student ombudsmen who are responsible for supporting students who often do not know where to turn to for support at the university. The ombudsmen have on-campus offices, hold office hours, and are frequently turned to regarding a variety of concerns. One ombudsman explained that she often makes referrals, communicates with faculty and staff members on behalf of students, and counsels them on how to proceed with their concerns. If an academic dishonesty situation were to arise, the ombudsmen often counsel students about the disciplinary process and/or attends hearings with the student. This is a role dean of students office staff members in other countries such as the United States might serve.

Further, it is important to note that while citizens of Sweden do not pay tuition fees, non-European students began paying tuition fees in 2011. This policy change has resulted in a significant decrease in international student enrollment in Sweden who are not part of exchange programs. Between 2010 and 2011 alone, this category of students studying in Sweden decreased by 80 percent, but is now slowly on the rise again. Asian and African students made up the largest proportion of the decrease (Universitetskanslersämbetet, 2014).

Despite paying fees, many non-European students do still enroll in Swedish higher education alongside European students, and students part of exchange programs, who are exempt from fees. This has created a situation where non-European students are demanding more support because they are "customers." Recently non-European students at Stockholm University have asked for more activities since they are paying for their education. The university, in turn, reached out to the student union and has charged them with supplying additional activities for non-European students. A staff member at the union explained that they do provide these services but question why they shouldn't be targeted to all students. According to the union staff, this contrast between customer-minded non-European students and the more traditional citizen-minded European students has become more visible. Overall, these two developments, the end of mandatory student union membership, and the introduction of tuition fees for non-European students in Sweden seem to already be reshaping student services in Sweden.

References

Universitetskanslersämbetet. (2014). Universitet och högskolor. Årsrapport 2014. Rapport 2014:7. [Swedish Higher Education Authority, yearly report 2014.]

Administrative Procedure Act [Förvaltningslagen]. (FL, SFS 1986:223).

Higher Education Law [Högskolelagen]. (HL, SFS 1992:1434).

Higher Education Ordinance [Högskoleförordningen]. (HF, SFS 1993:100).

The Instrument of Government [Regeringsformen]. (RF).