

THE 'WHAT', 'WHY' AND 'HOW' OF QUALITY IN NORDIC HIGHER EDUCATION REFORMS



DANISH CENTRE FOR STUDIES IN
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DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
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EAIR FORUM 2019
27 AUGUST 2019

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OR – YET ANOTHER PAPER ABOUT QUALITY



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BACKGROUND

Quality in higher education

- Quality has been a long-standing policy concern across Europe
 - The responsibilities of universities increase with student numbers, student mobility etc.
 - Responsibility vs. competitive power
- Quality remains a contested concept
 - No academic consensus (quality as multidimensional/-faceted)
 - Policies are "free" to define quality
- Key question: how is this freedom enacted in the Nordic countries?

BACKGROUND

Why the Nordics?

- A Nordic model of higher education?
 - Predominantly public higher education
 - Comparatively similar governance frameworks
 - Cultural commonalities
- Substantial reforms over the past decades
 - Divergence or still a common model?
- Substudy in the project: Pathways to improve quality in higher education (PIQUED)
 - Focus on investigating quality work and indicators for measuring quality in higher education – particularly in a Danish context.
 - www.ps.au.dk/piqued

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Ideational institutionalism (Beland & Cox 2010 etc.)

- A focus on ideas as key in understanding policy changes
 - Ideas work on different levels
 - Policy solutions
 - Problem definitions
 - Public philosophies
- Policy developments in different national contexts are influenced by:
 - Generalized ideas that travel (e.g. through the Bologna Process)
 - The national 'ideational' setup, which influences e.g. which ideas are seen as relevant
- Quality as an idea?
 - Are there specific versions and translations of quality that travel around?

RESEARCH APPROACH

- A focus on key policy documents
- White papers
 - Documents published, explaining the understandings and rationales behind policy shifts
 - Not just reform documentation
- Time frame: from approximately 2000 til 2019
- Denmark, Norway, Sweden
- Thematic analysis – focusing on – ‘what’, ‘why’ and ‘how’ concerning quality.
 - Where is quality discussed, and how

THE 'WHAT'?

What is quality?

- Resembles public philosophies in ideational terms
- Attempts at defining the concept

Denmark:

- From very vaguely – and indirectly defined to recently much more specifically
- Quality is most often mentioned in relation to relevance – but as a separate concept: quality *and* relevance.
- Often the text goes on to further specify/operationalize relevance, but not quality
- Not a clear definition of quality until 2017 where it is defined as “learning outcome”
 - Here also linked to relevance since learning outcome is measured through students perceptions of e.g. environment – and their employment rates.

THE 'WHAT'?

Sweden:

- Vague definition of quality – related to preparing the students for professional activities, PhD education, to provide continuing education and further education and to develop and form the student as an individual.
- The 1993 reform implied an underlining of *the Bildung*, but also labour market relevance. Over time, balance between these two
- Most recently quality related to quality assurance

Norway:

- From ambiguous and relational definitions (White Paper for Quality Reform) and circular definitions
- To more precise definitions in two recent White papers (focused on structural reform and quality culture): identify specific quality indicators in the process of structural reform.
- In culture for quality, quality is defined as: learning results and personal development, relevance and efficient time to degree. But also mention standards and excellence
- From a limited definition to multiplicity of definitions

THE 'WHY'?

The why means the problem with quality?

- Problem definitions in ideational terms
- Should determine which solutions are appropriate
 - Even when we do not assume linearity, one can expect that ad-hoc problem definitions try to make meaningful linkages

Denmark: problem definition vary over time, but consistent problems seem to be the changing external conditions, poor internal control, and student progression

Sweden: students' choice of educational programmes, is the dimensioning of the system well balanced

Norway: ('good but could be better'), student expectations, efficiency (time to degree), but also changing societal conditions and demands of the knowledge society. In recent white paper – more emphasis on teaching and learning

THE 'HOW'?

The how relates to the instruments seen as relevant to address the problem

- Policy solutions in ideational terms

Denmark

- a number of different solutions are highlighted in the documents over time. Most instruments however deal with the framework around education – e.g. strengthening structures, assessment, counselling, economic incentives (for institutions) to get the students to finish on time etc.
- Interestingly all factors that assume 'quality', but malfunctioning structures around it

THE 'HOW'?

Sweden

- emphasis on student demand and closer co-operation between higher education and labour market; further and continuing education; ‘commissioned education’ (like commissioned research)
- UKÄ should evaluate how the arenas for co-operation between the institutions and the labour market are functioning

Norway

- Major reform of whole system in 2003 – emphasized : flexible steering and autonomy, equal access and fairness, more effective study programmes, more feedback, new technology, and institutional responsibility for quality development (and external QA) – but also strong emphasis on internationalisation
- More recently: 1) indicators + 2) a clear turn towards primary process, teaching and learning (student engagement, student centered teaching and learning, work with study programmes etc); emphasis on quality culture, introduces pedagogical merit systems, national competitive arena for educational quality, national quality portal, +++++

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

- Quality as a noun ('object') **AND** quality as an adjective ('property *of*')
 - Higher degrees of abstraction shift quality into an object
- Quality as an instrumental **AND** ideal concept
 - Increased emphasis on instrumentalism
- Quality as an outcome **AND** quality as a prerequisite
 - Quality as the overall objective, or means to an end (e.g. efficiency, relevance)
- Quality as the problem **AND** quality as the solution
- Quality as an empty **AND** crowded concept
 - Indirectly defined by what it is listed together with? (quality *and* relevance, quality *and* efficiency)
 - Everything and nothing
 - But, still has ideational power by legitimising device for a range of policy debates

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

- Not "just" multiple conceptualisations – different status and function
 - Requires precision about what we talk about
- Not "just" multifaceted and multidimensional – each dimension is nationally embedded
 - E.g. 'relevance' definition and its coupling to quality is different even in these comparatively similar countries (nordic welfare state tradition)
 - What does this mean for international comparative studies?
- Relational *and* empty – but movement from trusting institutions to define, to developing indicators and plotting in content in the policy domain
 - From perception of being steered to stronger steering?
 - A question of indicators? If indicators fill the emptiness, does this crowd out multiplicity of meanings?
 - A question of culture?

WAYS FORWARD

- Not get lost in the ‘complexity trap’ – everything is complex, always
 - If the premise and conclusion imply complexity – analysis void.
- How does ‘quality’ emerge as an issue that becomes definitional – what are the conditions under which ambiguity is reduced and content is stabilized?
 - What are the consequences of narrowing down definitions of quality (e.g. Denmark)
- From overall ‘reform analysis’ to:
 1. Systematic mapping of the relationship between ideas and instruments
 - National particularities of repackaging issues over time
 - More nuanced comparison between countries, seemingly similar cross-national trends in comparatively similar countries (e.g. Emphasis on quality in the Nordics in recent decades) reveal ‘shocking diversity’ (Neave 2003)
 - => Patterns across countries but also across time.
 2. Analysis of practices and ‘work’ done concerning quality
 - Shift focus from definitional issues to work conducted to maintain and enhance quality



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