



# Quality in Education

The new Swedish HSV/UKÄ system for higher education quality assessment, and its possible alternatives

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# Bold Claims

- It is well known that many assessments of higher education programs are based on an image of the 'real thing' that is to a large extent the result of wishful thinking by program managers and other responsible persons.
- This can in principle be avoided by basing the assessment on 'hard evidence' of the outcomes of programs.
- Unfortunately, this might turn out difficult to accomplish, for several reasons.

# The HSV/UKÄ system

- Assessment of compliance with 'degree requirements'.
- Based on degree theses (Master, Bachelor, Engineering) and informal assessment of evidence in theses of fulfillment of requirements.
- Some requirements not believed visible in theses can be assessed from self-evaluations, the most obvious being oral presentation skills.
- Non-interactive. Teachers and students are interviewed in teleconference, but whatever comes out can only be used marginally. Alumni questionnaires are collected but typically are not really used. Students in programs are merely used as informers ('tjallare').

# Evaluations of assessment system

- By ENQA, the European Network for Quality Assessment in higher education (April 2012)
- By A. Lundmark and M. Sjölund, evaluation researchers at Uppsala University (Sept 2012)
- By L. Adamsson, Studieförbundet Näringsliv och Samhälle (industry lobby organization) (May 2013)
- By rectors and prorectors of Lund and Uppsala Universities (SvD Sept 24 2013)

# Summary of evaluations

- The three fairly deep evaluations agree in that the HSV/UKÄ system is found to have low validity and low reliability, is based on unclear criteria that are too loosely coupled to any reasonable definition of educational quality, and is inconsistently and arbitrarily applied. These evaluations are, however, quite politely written.
- The evaluations also differ in outlook: The ENQA evaluation is set against the ENQA standards for HE evaluations (framed as 'best practices'), the Uppsala work against the Swedish HE regulation system, and the SNS study towards industry requirements on educated students (employability, 'anställbarhet', in Bologna terminology).
- However, all evaluators are anxious to evaluate the real effect of the system on education.
- It is quite remarkable that the HSV/UKÄ system seems simultaneously deficient from each of these three different evaluative perspectives.

# Evidence Based Assessment (EBA)

- Although the Ministry of Higher Education (HE) has prescribed the current system to surprising detail (considering its normal role and apparent competence), there is also a kind of apologia for it.
- Evidence based assessment searches for evidence of goal fulfilment. There can often be such evidence, but usually it is difficult to find, and often it cannot be found at all.

# Misunderstanding measurables

- When EBA is pushed in from above, the search for reasonable evidence becomes somewhat desperate, and pseudo-evidence is invariably accepted.
- In HE, the true evidence must necessarily be found in students after their graduation.
- However, the HSV/UKÄ system looks for evidence in degree theses, a heavily supervised piece of writing which is, by the HE ordinance, not meant to contain the evidence sought for. In Sweden's regulatory framework, degree theses are not supposed to be applications for degrees.

# Pseudo-critical thinking in the educational establishment

- Richard Paul, Center for Critical Thinking and Moral Critique:
- In California School system, EBA has been extensively used and is by now somewhat discredited.
- Assessors look desperately, without proper training and with inadequate time allocated, for shallow signs of excellence and decline. The signs adopted vary enormously between assessors, despite guidelines.
- In most cases, intellectual quality of work cannot be assessed.
- Long term result is to destructively twist education from deep learning to shallow parroting, and to develop a feeling among students of not being competently taught or assessed.
- The above would not be a completely unfair description of the actual HSV/UKÄ assessment projects.



# Assessment of degree theses

- Grading degree theses by assessment has been shown unexpectedly unreliable
- In real life, degree theses are assessed by persons familiar with the paradigm of the student.
- Random allocation of theses gives a good estimate of the diversity of paradigms within an area: lower assessed mean grade is sign of better diversity!  
(Mullins, Kiley 2002)

# Is EBA possible?

- There is today no reference case where EBA was demonstrated (by competent researchers) effective in higher education assessments. EBA is pushed exactly like pseudo-sciences.
- Still, EBA might be worthwhile under some conditions. These conditions have not yet been met.

# Most likely, EBA IS possible IF there is:

- Sufficient preparation, competence and understanding in the assessment project
- Adequate economical/personell resources,
- Significantly improved training of assessors.
- Changing the Swedish HE ordinance to make the degree thesis an application for degree.
- Some check against over-advising (advisor 'writing' the thesis, many students for one thesis, etc).
- Evaluation of the assessment system (An ENQA requirement initially ignored by HSV/UKÄ – but fortunately it has been evaluated by others).

# Is EBA effective?/1

- Evidence based methods are pushed because they seem more 'scientific' than alternatives, the assumption being that experts in the field are unable to assess the effectiveness of methods they use.
- However, EBA methods almost always fail to measure a both relevant and true outcome. They fail either in validity (measuring the wrong thing, possibly accurately) or in reliability (measuring possibly the right thing, but inaccurately). The HSV/UKÄ system seems unique in failing in both (measuring the wrong thing inaccurately).

# Is EBA effective?/2

- In the current case, the degree requirements are of low quality and should be heavily interpreted by competent assessors.
- The unfortunate – and embarrassing - lack in practice of assessment of the intellectual quality of theses is disturbing, but reflects a general problem with EBA – it would be too expensive to make a true evaluation.
- There is theoretically no recipe for improving a 'failed' program. But in practice, any program assessed by the HSV/UKÄ method can get a better 'grade' by increasing thesis advisors' part in the thesis production and conforming to the details of the realized assessment practice. This would in no way increase the competence of the student, and in many cases it would be like cheating the student.

# A sound evaluation system?

- An informed description of the proper role of the modern university can be found in Schleiermacher: *Universitätsschriften*, (reprinted Herakleitos 1998). It is often in agreement with Newman: *The idea of a University*, and the American Liberal Arts tradition.
- (“What are Universities for?” LERU Report, 2008)
- (Bill Readings: *The University in Ruins*(1995);
- Cristoph Marksches: *What can still be learnt von Humboldt?* (2010))

# Evaluation Criteria

- Building an assessment system on bureaucratic checks against sloppy degree requirements formulated by an ignorant committee, of the Swedish type, is self-defeating.
- Evaluation should target the purpose of the program, not proxies in form of diffuse degree requirements.
- The role of HE is to develop the potential of the student to the fullest extent possible.
- In other words, HE is for students and only indirectly for bureaucrats, teachers and industrialists. It is the task of the latter to understand what makes a program worthwhile to students and tax-payers, not the opposite way around.

# Student-oriented evaluation system/1

- Students should drive assessment and should not be used as informers. Assessment can start from the following points:
- Does the program meet students' and alumnis' expectations? (coverage, teaching quality, etc)
- Is the program motivated as a good start for a career in research, development or operations?
- Is student and alumni influence on program development appropriate and well organized (not too little – not too much)?



# Student-oriented evaluation system/2

- Are the curriculum regulations well motivated and understandable?
- Are the courses appropriate? (compulsory courses well motivated, broad possibilities for choice according to career goals)
- Is the climate in the program both supportive and competitive to an appropriate degree?  
Diversity in student body?

# Student-oriented evaluation system/3

- Is the support system (e.g., counseling, program-related information, supplementary instruction, remedial measures, honour's courses, prizes, etc) appropriate?
- Does the teacher group show adequate diversity? (hrmmm..)
- Throughput statistics.
- Student course evaluations.

# Student-oriented evaluation system/4

- We can now also ask ourselves about evidence of results
- Degree theses assessed in context of professional (possibly, but not necessarily, academic) purpose, and by writing quality (why, how, outcome of project, readability).
- Employment statistics (its use can be enormously improved)
- Deeper student and alumni analyses

# Is student-orientation possible?

- Subjectivity in all types of assessment must be acknowledged and discussed instead of being hidden in jargon.
- Dividing line between evidence and pseudo-evidence?
- Relevant ethnic/socioeconomic factors addressed? (international English should not be assessed as English, it has many types of ambiguities different from typical ambiguities of English, deriving from native languages of their speakers)
- BEWARE: of attempts to brainwash students!  
The University is not a cathedral school.
- BEWARE: of myths thriving in the educational establishment!  
Critical thinking can, and should, be applied both ways.

# Does it really matter?

- Governments' inability to assess the activities they finance is maybe the rule rather than exception, so why bother?
- The university system is robust and survives repeatedly misplaced efforts to 'improve' it.
- Many of the big and small disasters in human history were caused by optimization towards inaccurate proxy targets. The HE sector is maybe less vulnerable?
- **However, it should not be the rule that efforts to build subjects able to think are assessed by methods that suggest that thinking is not important!**

# The University in Ruins

The University system is developing towards the status of a transnational corporation... How can we raise the question of accountability without giving in to the shallow logic of accounting? Can we present accountability as something that exceeds this logic? ... If pedagogy is to pose a challenge to the ever-increasing bureaucratization of the University, it will need to decenter the vision of the educational process, not merely adopt an oppositional stance in teaching. Only this can resist commodification... Learning to think is to explore an open network of obligations that keeps the questions of meaning and value open to debate.

*(Bill Readings, 1995)*

# Appendix: History of institutional education: Modern Universities

Modern Universities: German Neo-humanism

Reforms in Göttingen and Jena

Berlin (1810)

St Petersburg (1819?)

University College/King's College (1826?)

Tokyo University (1876)

Johns Hopkins (1876)

Old universities 'modernized' (1880-1930)

Institutes of Technology 'modernized' (1900-1930)

'Post-historical Universities' (1968-??)

# Appendix: History of institutional education: Modern University Icons

Immanuel Kant

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Friedrich Schleiermacher

Friedrich Schiller

Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt

John Henry Newman

Friedrich Althoff

Thomas Henry Huxley

Jean-Francois Lyotard

Allan Bloom

Martha Nussbaum



# That's all, folks!



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