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# The Neoliberal New Public Management influence on the Swedish Higher education

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**Abstract:** This study is about neoliberal New Public Management (NPM) entry into the Swedish higher education institutions, its effects and the possible alternatives to it. Academic articles, policy documents and government reports are used for the study. The results of the study show in the Swedish higher education institutions, NPM market characters such as efficiency, competition, quality control, customer satisfaction and manpower training for the labour market are emphasised. Easily measurable knowledge is prioritized at the expense of critical and analytical knowledge. Higher education's autonomy is to some extent violated, collegial leadership is replaced by appointee leadership, and staff are under pressure to follow instructions instead of exercising their academic freedom. Based on these findings I will argue against these trends and emphasise on the importance of all partners in higher education to review the present condition to facilitate the possibility of keeping higher education as public autonomous institutions, academic freedom intact, assure that higher education should have both professional and democratic contents, and that higher education should continue to undertake basic long-term and short-term research.

**Keywords:** Higher education, Neoliberalism, New Public Management, Sweden.

## Introduction

Higher education institutions are not democratic institutions that gradually turned into less democratic ones. In the history of higher education institutions and on how they are administered, it is not difficult to note the dominance of some groups isolating themselves from the majority of the population to keep their privileged position within the group. To go into the detailed discussion of history of higher education is not the intention of this article. The article will limit itself to the changes that took place in higher education, specifically in the Swedish higher education during the last three to four decades by changes initiated to implement neoliberal NPM. To understand it and then to scrutinize its role in the Swedish

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higher education articles, books as well as government policy documents that discuss the situation in the national and international arena are used.

Neoliberal NPM is an international trend with its roots in the Anglo-Saxon world. It emerged after the 1970s-economic crisis which led to increased oil price. It was strengthened and reached its peak during the 1980s under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher in England and Ronald Reagan in the US. It was introduced to Sweden in the early 1980s by the Social Democratic government that returned to power after being in opposition for some years, with the intention of creating flexible and effective public administration (Forssell, 2001). Later in the beginning of the 1990s when the right-wing coalition took power, it got the fertile ground for its expansion. The economic crisis during this period and the government that was ideologically supporting this reform boosted the reform in relation to NPM. According to Wiborg (2012), the conservative-led coalition introduced market-oriented scheme in both state-owned enterprises and in the public sector in the beginning of the 1990s.

### **Neoliberalism and NPM**

To find out the effect of neoliberal NPM on higher education in general and on the Swedish higher education in particular, it is relevant to introduce these two terms and what they stand for. Wiber by quoting Harvey defines neoliberalism as follows:

Although a complex set of ideas, neo-liberalism can be broadly defined as in the first instance, a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. (Harvey 2005, 2 in Wiber, 2012, p.408).

In the definition above the characteristics of neoliberalism is introduced in soft and neutral terms. Henry Giroux (2015) in his article on higher education takes stand and paints the dangerous characteristics of neoliberalism. He describes it as “savage free-market fundamentalism,” “predatory form of market fundamentalism,” “latest stage of predatory capitalism,” “...seeks ...to destroy any notion of the common good,” etc. He introduces what a raw neoliberalism could look like in the following quotation.

Neoliberalism is the latest stage of predatory capitalism and is part of a broader project of restoring class power and consolidating the rapid concentration of capital. It is a political and economic project that constitutes an ideology, mode of governance, policy, and form of public pedagogy. As an ideology, it construes profit-making as the essence of democracy, consuming as the only operable form of citizenship, and an irrational belief in the market to solve all problems and serve as a model for structuring all social relations. As a mode of governance, it produces identities, subjects, and ways of life free of government regulations, driven by a survival of the fittest ethic,

grounded in the idea of the free, possessive individual, and committed to the right of ruling groups and institutions to accrue wealth removed from matters of ethics and social costs. As a policy and political project, neoliberalism is wedded to the privatization of public services, selling off of state functions, deregulation of finance and labour, elimination of the welfare state and unions, liberalization of trade in goods and capital investment, and the marketization and commodification of society. As a form of public pedagogy and cultural politics, neoliberalism casts all dimensions of life in terms of market rationality. One consequence is that neoliberalism legitimates a culture of cruelty and harsh competitiveness and wages a war against public values and those public spheres that contest the rule and ideology of capital. It saps the democratic foundation of solidarity, degrades collaboration, and tears up all forms of social obligation. (Giroux, 2015, 102).

As we read it above Giroux (2015) gives a picture of neoliberalism from different angles. He exposes the ideological, governance, policy and political and public pedagogy and cultural politics of neoliberalism with emphasis with its anti-democratic anti solidarity characters (ibid.).

The practice of neoliberalism by using NPM also needs to be defined. According to Asklung and Stensaker,

A new public management perspective rests on some shared principles (Pollitt 1993; Naschold 1996; Christensen & Laegreid 1998: 2). The public sector should learn from the private sector, where the former should attend to more clear-cut goals, cost-efficiency, competition, and output control. The perspective is wedded to a rational and top-down model of organisational behaviour emphasising that leaders should have a lot of discretion to manage and that they should be given more authority in the decision-making processes... (Asklung & Stensaker, 2002 p.114)

According to Robert Behin, NPM "...favours decentralized administration, delegation of discretion, contracting for good services, and the use of the market mechanisms of competition and customer service to improve performance..." (Pfiffner, 2004, 4). Lorenz (2012) explains that NPM mainly emphasis on efficiency, quality, accountability, transparency, and flexibility. Emphasis on these aspects are usually at the expense of limiting resources for public good (Hood, 1991) as well as violating others right of participation in the decision-making process.

### **The Swedish higher education**

It could be relevant for the reader to get a short historical overview of the Swedish higher education. The first Swedish university is Uppsala university that was founded in 1477 followed by University of Lund in 1668 (Before Lund, there were two Swedish higher

education institutions one in Estonia, from 1632 and the other one in Åbo in Finland from 1640). After 1870s more higher education institutions were founded in the two big Swedish cities of Gothenburg and Stockholm as well as in the other regions of the country (Agval & Olofsson, 2013).

The number of higher education institutions were however limited for a long time. In 1977, 12 institutions were given a university college status (Riksdag,1975). Based on demands and their assessment for fulfilling the necessary criterion some of the newly established colleges were later lifted to a university status. One such an example is my current working place Karlstad University, which was founded as a teacher training institute in 1843 and became a branch of University of Gothenburg from 1967-1977. Then it was promoted to university college in 1977, before it became a full-fledged university 22 years later in 1999 (Karlstad University, 2017).

As Sweden was under a long period dominated by a social democratic political ideology higher education in addition to providing qualified manpower was supposed to promote equality and social justice in the society. This ideology was realised by financing higher education with tax payers' money, to allow the privilege of attending higher education for all citizens without having to pay fees.

Higher education in Sweden has a long history of administration by rules and regulations from the central state (Liedman, 2009). The control mechanism used by the central state was evaluation of the input into the system and activities undertaken by using the resources allocated to them (Ministry of education & research, 1992/2013).

Administration by goals and results was introduced later followed by the principles of decentralization. Control through instruments of evaluation, reporting and resources distribution according to goals and results achieved continued. Later the introduction of the Bologna process and the international influences contributed to further extending of administration by goals and results as well as standardization (SOU 2007:75) which expressed itself by control, audit and evaluation of what was planned and what was achieved (Fägerlind & Strömquist, 2004).

Compared to decades back universities are today more autonomous today in their relation to the central authorities (Liedman, 2009). But the major issue is if the decentralisation and relative autonomy is leading to improving the administration. An equally relevant issue is whether this autonomy is leading to staff's and students' participation in leading the universities.

## **The Swedish higher education under New Public Management (NPM).**

The conservative forces, using the economic crisis in the beginning of the 1990s as an excuse took the opportunity to attack what they considered as their enemy number one, the public sector. They used all means to convince the public that the way to get out of the crisis is to drain the resources of the welfare and other public sectors. Higher education was not an exception.

Askling & Stensaker explain how NPM was introduced to higher education.

In Sweden, in the beginning of the 1990s, the governmental reform work was also influenced by ideas from the new public management movement. However, it was the learning organisation model that provided the framework when the National Agency of Higher Education introduced its quality assessment programme. Gradually, although accompanied by ambiguity, uncertainty, and also conflicts, at many institutions, the leadership has been strengthened by the appointment of additional academic sub-leaders (such as senior advisers, vice-rectors), by the establishment of inter-faculty councils responsible for preparing policy and action plans for particular areas and for guiding the implementation processes. (Askling & Stensaker, 2002, 117)

During the implementation years of NPM, university administration was decentralised and it was justified by providing more autonomy to universities. Resources to universities were limited and allocated based on their fulfilling of goals set and results achieved. Mechanisms for controlling cost-effectiveness and efficiency were developed. Through a political decision a quasi-market was introduced, which led to competition between universities for students (Hall, 2012; Hasselberg, 2012) nationally and internationally.

When the right-wing government which was the main proponent of NPM took power again after the 2006 election, it started discussing about the importance of sharing the international education market and in 2010 it took a decision to take away the possibility for some category of students to attend higher education in Sweden without paying fee (Ministry of Education & Research, 2010). Before this decision the university education was fee free and many students from developing countries with meagre resources to pay for their studies, had benefited from this solidarity based provision by the Swedish higher education.

Focus on cost effectiveness, efficiency, control and customer satisfaction are introduced as part of the vision of universities as organisations that will be a part of the future market. Standardization as a tool of control, making subjects more attractive to students and considering students as “individual investors” and universities as “education providers” was widely spread (Beach, 2013). This raised discussions between those who would like to consider higher education as public good and those who would like to have it as private good

or commodity for sale. The later wanted to create the entrepreneurial university for providing education under private institutions (Tolofari, 2008).

Even if, they are state financed, due to the quasi-market created by political decision (Hasselberg, 2012) universities started to engage in competition with each other by using evaluation of cost effectiveness, quality of education and the number of students they are admitting. The resources they are getting from the central government are provided based on the results reported or found out by supervisions. Resources are centrally regulated, including the number of students' universities should admit, if they register more than the given numbers of students or "over produce" they are not getting refunded for those extra students (Hall, 2012).

With creating of market oriented higher education sector, there was also a focus on customer oriented services and providing different choices (Hall, 2012). The competition was for providing more choices to attract more students ("customers"), strong emphasis was given to the satisfaction of participants compared to the content of the courses they are attending. This would be confirmed mainly through course evaluations. Positive evaluations are believed attracting more students, will be used to argue for continuing the same course and to show to other higher education actors how everything is functioning well.

Based on the market principle of "low cost and high production", keeping course budget to the minimum was emphasised. Due to this the same courses are repeated year after year, which could negatively influence creativity and developing new ideas. As there are already established courses and the number of students attending the courses are determined centrally, universities are hesitant to start new courses that they suspect will not attract more students. This is even used as an argument for claiming that new courses are not in demand.

The "low cost and high production" market principle usually results in an increased workload for the faculty (Lorenz, 2012). When the budget stays where it was and the number of students increase, staff is loaded in addition to the academic work with more paper work for course administration, evaluation and different kinds of reporting.

The courses or degree programmes are arranged according to the labour market demands. This focus mainly on the professional training has an impact on the content of given courses. Lecturers are "forced" to arrange their courses to match the professional needs of their students. The labour market is steering the work at universities.

Courses dealing with values, norms and critical analysis of society are minimal, absent and in some cases removed from the course lists. Some of the courses are considered economically unbeneficial for the departments providing them. Liedman (2009) writes that subjects of humanities and social sciences that are focusing on communication, discussion, arguments

and expressions of different realities in different ways are not producing concrete and exact results as natural sciences. Due to this openness for different views and not producing concrete and measurable results from the market point of view, these subjects are viewed as not beneficial and they are rather considered as burdens to universities.

As a result of a customer orientation, in order to attract more “customers” to their services universities are forced to give a better image of themselves (Hall, 2012) in comparison to other universities. What they publish in their homepages is sometimes more important than what they accomplish in real terms. The competition in the national market could be through providing or promising to provide different facilities such as dormitories to rent without having to wait in a queue for a long time.

If we consider the leadership of higher education, there was a time when Swedish higher education was mainly led by academic colleagues where the vice-chancellor was a chairman of the university board (SFS 1977:263). This was changed in the reform of the 1993 (SFS 1993:100), which decided that the chairman of the board should be appointed by the government from outside the university and the autonomy reform of 2010 (Proposition 2009/10:149) continued on providing opportunity for the market and the industry to adhere more influence on universities. These government appointees are mainly their professional bases outside the universities in the politics, business or industry. They are appointed with the hope of creating a good relationship with the outside world, but it is also a systematic reform undertaken by the conservative government in power to have universities under the influence of strong business or industry. The strong influence by external forces is still evident in the Swedish higher education (Beach, 2013).

To understand the internal administration of the universities, it is relevant to go back and refer to the 1993 reform. When the draft of the reform on how to organise the university leadership was circulated for comments, two major proposals were presented. Academics came up with the idea that for doing the right thing for the academic work and to have a legitimacy within the university the leadership needs to be collegiality based. The Swedish Employer’s Association emphasised on its NPM influenced proposal. Their proposal says, “Förordar en mer företagsliknande ledning (hierarkisk), vilken innebär en förenkling och tydliggörande av ledningsorganisationen som motverkar byråkrati och ger snabbare anpassning till nya krav och förutsättningar” [Prefers a more business-like leadership (hierarchical), which implies a simplification and clarification of the management organization that counteracts bureaucracy and provides faster adaptation to new requirements and conditions] (Björck, 2013, 10). Later when the issue was referred to the parliament session, the first alternative was neglected and decisions were taken in favour of the proposal from Swedish Employer’s Association (ibid).



In line with reforms that were emphasising NPM in the internal administration of universities, the lineal (vertical) leadership was introduced, in which it is difficult to question the authority of the vice-chancellors, faculty deans and heads of departments. The authority of these leaders sometimes shows itself in the decisions they are making without collegial consultation on important issues that concerns the whole staff in the universities, faculties or departments. There are cases where issues raised by the staff or suggestions by professional groups are completely ignored in favour of these chiefs' authoritative decisions.

Another impact of NPM on the Swedish higher education is expressed in the struggle between different forces from within and outside the institutions. Lars Engwall (2007) by referring to DiMaggio and Powell (1983) explains the presence of coercive, normative and mimetic forces within universities. Coercive forces focus on working with regulations and rules; normative forces will exercise norms created through professions; and mimetic forces will follow the new trends in the management system. By citing Pollitt & Bouckaret, Jim Barry et al (2006) discusses similar trends to the ones mentioned above. According their citation, there are different groupings in the Swedish higher education. There are the decentralists, the traditionalists and the economizers. Among these three groupings, the economizers are the dominant group.

From the attempt to explain what is going on within the Swedish higher education administration, it will not be difficult to understand which groups have the upper hand. Due to their close ties to the new trends of neoliberal NPM, the mimetic forces and the economizers groups are in the forefront dominating the higher education institutions.

### **Post-New Public Management in the Swedish higher education**

NPM is implemented in different public sectors and it has shown that it is not keeping its promise for positive development. There is a recent government investigation which reviewed the leadership in higher education. The outcome of the investigation was short of indicating the negative effect of NPM and recommended the continuation of vertical leadership within universities (SOU 2015:92). On the other hand, there is a recent report (Molander, 2017), which recommended some elements of NPM such as competition, result based management and evaluation to be adjusted to the sector's environment in order to be used for successful implementations of programs. The report emphasised on the need for change by reviewing the whole package of NPM. It is among other things also emphasised on the need for respect of differences between the public and private sectors.

In general time has allowed for researchers to evaluate implementation of NPM, to be able to show its short comings. Due to this there is an intention to move beyond NPM. There is no doubt that NPM is still prevailing but there are academicians who could see the move to Post-New Public Management which is promising to alleviate the weaknesses of the NPM.

In their article, educational reforms and marketization in Norway, Ingrid Helgøy and Anne Homme (2016) based on their research provide in the following table a comparison between NPM and post-NPM approaches.

**Table 1.** Comparing public perspectives on reform: New Public Management (NPM) and post-NPM.

Dimensions of reforms	NPM	Post--NPM
Norms and values	Economic	Democratic
View of the public	Customers; an aggregation individual interests	Citizens and stakeholders, in dialogue about shared values
Role of government	Steering	Serving through dialogue
Mechanisms for achieving policy objectives	Incentive structures, benchmarking, competition and marketization	Regain central capacity and control through coalition building, co-ordination and collaboration (common IT solutions at the national level, municipal projects, evidence-based practices)
Approach to accountability	Market-driven, explicit standards of performance, output control of organization performance	Multifaceted – public servants must attend to the law, community values, political norms, professional standards and citizens' interests
Administrative discretion	Hands-on management and discretionary control	Discretion is needed, but it is constrained and accountable
Organizational structure	Horizontal specialization and vertical devolution	Collaborative structures, horizontal and vertical co-ordination

Source: Helgøy and Homme, 2016, p.55.

In an extension to the critic on NPM, in a book review titled, *The limits of post-New Public Management and Beyond*, Jong S. Jun writes,

Transcending New Public Management (2007) and *Autonomy and Regulation* (2006), edited by Tom Christensen and Per Lægveid, address the emergence of post-NPM, focusing on recent developments in public management and administrative reform. The authors argue that NPM, known as the first generation of reform, has produced

unintended consequences. Accordingly, the basic aim of post-NPM, the second generation of reform, is to advocate recentralization and re-regulation in order to correct the dysfunctional aspects of NPM, strengthen governing capacity, and improve control and coordination within and across political-administrative systems... (Jun, 2009, 152).

According to Jun, Post-NPM major ideas are integration, capacity building, coordination and creating clear role relationships. These ideas also emphasize on partnership between private and public sector and strengthening government involvement. Government involvement through different initiatives, recentralization, re-regulation and strengthening central political and administrative capacity (Jun, 2009, 162-163)

It is undeniable that some issues that are emphasised by NPM such as decentralisation, improving quality and keeping costs low could be considered positive. The problem however lies on the implementation. Claiming for decentralisation for the benefit of some groups hijacking resources and responsibilities for themselves, without considering a wider participation on the decision-making process; improving quality of education by deliberately avoiding some subjects as well as taking out relevant themes from course contents; and emphasising on low cost on the expense of overloading staff with work that could lead to stress and different health problems could not be viable alternatives. It is also acceptable to partner with business and industries but the major issue is what does the partnering means for universities, partnering as equals or allowing the business and industry to dictate how the universities should run their business?

As we saw earlier some opponents of the democratic collegial leadership try to emphasis on the difficulty of such leadership in decision making process compared to direct vertical leadership. According to them vertical leadership is suitable for faster decision making. What they forget or deliberately ignore, is the importance of collegial participation in the decision-making process in a democratic system. They cannot see that once a common agreement is reached after participants' discussion on an issue and the detailed implementation task is delegated to elected colleagues, the implementation process of collegial leadership can be as fast as the lineal organisation. When problems are arising, in realising the collegial decision making and implementing process there are always possibilities to deal with them and improve the process.

It is clear that the future university should be effective with good quality and with a balanced budget. But a university not based on participation of students and staff, on democratic principles, academic freedom, creative environment, critical view on the realities in its surrounding and in the wider world is not worth to call itself a university. An institution that is focusing only on producing professionals and reproducing the different structures of the existing society is something else than a university.

## **Discussion**

Today there are understandings that the NPM is not the best solution to deal with higher education as its supporters claimed. But still there is emphasis on its components of efficiency, effectiveness and cost minimization. It also focuses on administering higher education by administrators instead of academicians.

For Swedish higher education, there is a need to detach itself or minimize the influence from NPM, to embrace some of the constructive ideas of Post-NPM and even to go beyond them, it needs to be sceptical to some reform ideas being imposed on it. There is also a need to think about partners outside the university mainly the big business. Does higher education considered as equal partner or the big business is senior partner that provides funds to impose on higher education its will on what to teach and on what to research about. There is also a need to scrutinize what is coming along with the proposal for efficiency, competition, quality control, customer satisfaction, etc.

Another major issue is the role of the university in the society. The neoliberal NPM would like universities to be research centres for what they want to know to improve the market and to be manpower training institutions. Is that the only thing expected of universities? Wilhelm von Humboldt, who founded the University of Berlin in 1810 emphasised that a university should be an establishment for short term and long term basic research as well as general education not only for occupational training. He also emphasised on the need for considering students as co-researchers and the importance of unity between teaching and research (UNESCO, 2000).

In a recent memory, the spread of NPM in the higher education institutions in Sweden speeded up during the right-wing coalition government between 2006-2014. The new coalition of Social Democratic and green party, even if they did not move away from this trend, but the speed of pushing higher education in that direction was temporarily slowed down compared to the previous government.

The right-wing coalition, at the end of its mandate, tried to regulate all universities to be administered by trustees. That was the first planned move towards privatization of Swedish universities. After a decision that foreign students, mainly from countries outside the European Union or from universities that did not have bilateral agreement with Swedish universities, should pay fee for their university education in Sweden, the government did not dare to include the Swedish students in the fee-paying group. But I think, that attempts to gradually move towards privatization of universities had a long-range plan to impose fee even on Swedish students. If the Swedish higher education will remain as public good or if it is going to be a commodity for sale depends on future governments' preference of higher education policy direction.

The situation of higher education reform in England could send a warning signal for what might happen in Sweden. Before 2012 the higher education fee in England was around 3000 pounds. The claim was through this fee to support government expenses for higher education but it ended up by being very expensive for students. Within a few years the fees were raised by threefold and today the fee is about 9000 pounds per student per annum (Tomlinson, 2017). The loans for studying in higher education is burdening both students and their parents. Is Sweden ready to travel that way?

The arms of neoliberalism are long and their long-term effects can reach the wider society. There is a need for a careful step towards the future with conscious resistance to neoliberalism that Giroux is drawing our attention to.

Neoliberal societies, in general, exist in a perpetual state of war—a war waged by the financial and political elites against low-income groups, the elderly, minorities of colour, the unemployed, the homeless, immigrants, and any others whom the ruling class considers disposable. But disposable populations consigned to lives of terminal exclusion now include students, unemployed youth, and members of the working poor as well as the middle class who have no resources, jobs, or hope. They are the voiceless and powerless whose suffering is enveloped by the ghostly presence of the moral vacuity and criminogenic nature of neoliberalism. They are neoliberalism's greatest fear, and a potential threat in a society that has capitulated to market-driven forces. (Giroux, 2015, 103).

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