

# Navigating Higher Education Institutions in Times of Quality Assurance: The Assumptive Worlds of Vice Chancellors



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**Abstract** In this chapter, the vice chancellors' views of the idea of the university, quality in higher education, and national evaluation and quality assurance are described and analysed as parts of their assumptive worlds. A majority of all Swedish vice chancellors were interviewed, and their different and partly conflicting views are outlined as different regions of the Swedish higher education landscape. As a background, the changes to the governing of higher education in Sweden are briefly presented. The vice chancellors' assumptive worlds are discussed in relation to these transformations and to governing higher education by evaluation and as potential grounds for their common policy and action.

## Introduction

In the previous chapters, we delineated the background by describing the Swedish higher education system and the former national evaluation and quality assurance (EQA) systems. We further related them to a European context. In this chapter,<sup>1</sup> we will continue to map the scenery by focusing on the subjective understandings, or the "assumptive worlds" (Marshall et al. 1985), of Swedish vice chancellors.

We started our project, as described in the chapter "[National Evaluation Systems](#)", by gaining deeper insights into the different national EQA systems. These insights pointed to an expansion in the activities making up the EQA systems and to changes in governing by evaluations of higher education institutions (HEIs). Along with these changes, it was also obvious that higher education in Sweden was not isolated from Europe or beyond (as described in the chapter "[Europe in Sweden](#)"). The purpose, benefits, and quality of education and research at the HEIs had become matters

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<sup>1</sup>This chapter is a revision and reanalysis of two conference papers: Olofsson and Hult (2015) and Olofsson et al. (2015).

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of concern for instances far away from the universities. When taking part of documents at both the national and European levels concerning the evaluation and quality of higher education, we found an idiom and a jargon that was hard to see through. The texts concern quality, higher education, and quality assurance; at the same time, they do not touch upon what quality in higher education is or what the idea of the university is and should be. These questions were never really discussed. In light of the changing governing of higher education, we were interested in letting the Swedish vice chancellors state their views on these issues. Our focus on the actors doing the EQA led us not only to study the work of these actors but also their ideas and beliefs.

In Sweden, vice chancellors are academics with backgrounds as scholars and teachers within their respective discipline and within an academic tradition. Before 1993, the HEIs' staff elected the vice chancellor. Since 1993, the government has appointed vice chancellors after an internal selection process (SFS 1993:100). In Sweden, the vice chancellors at the universities and university colleges<sup>2</sup> are ultimately responsible for the quality of education at their HEIs. Today, they carry out their work in a quite different institutional setting compared to some decades ago, when they were able to "mind their own business" to a large degree, without much external interference. The questions of what a university is and what it ought to be are becoming increasingly politicised. In the European Union (EU), efforts have been made to unify the educational systems, and the far-reaching political consensus in Sweden is that it is crucial that Swedish HEIs are part of these efforts. Vice chancellors in Sweden thus have to consider a multitude of international and European as well as national and regional aspects. How they navigate in these relatively new circumstances for HEIs and how they formulate their agendas are of interest and relevance for their way of governing and forming policies and practices at their HEIs and for future joint actions within their network, the Association of Swedish Higher Education Institutions (ASHEI, *Sveriges Universitets- och högskoleförbund, SUHF*). When elaborating on decentred governance, Bevir (2011, p. 191) argues that "[t]he flow of politics is speech and other actions". Actors' contingent beliefs are meaningful parts of governing, as "there are diverse practices composed of multiple individuals acting on changing webs of beliefs rooted in overlapping traditions" (Bevir 2013, p. 57).

In this chapter, we will take a closer look at the beliefs and ideas about the university and of quality in higher education among vice chancellors of Swedish HEIs. Close attention will also be paid to their views on mechanisms of national EQA. The vice chancellors' ideas and views will be interpreted as parts of their assumptive worlds – that is, as a "shared sense of what is appropriate in action, interaction, and choice". Assumptive worlds, argue Marshall et al. (1985, p. 90 and 114), "provide the model or skeleton and connective tissue that pulls together data from various views of policy making". Since the vice chancellors are the executive leaders at the

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<sup>2</sup>The difference is primarily that universities do not need to apply for degree-awarding powers to the same extent as university colleges (Swedish Higher Education Authority [SHEA] n.d.).

HEIs, we argue that studying their assumptive worlds concerning external EQA will give insights into the governing of higher education.

Next, we give a short background on national EQA in Sweden, including some important changes in the governing of higher education. This will be followed by a brief account of our methodology and of the concept of assumptive worlds. We then present the Swedish higher education landscape and national EQA, as perceived by the vice chancellors. Finally, the vice chancellors' assumptive worlds will be discussed in relation to the transforming governing of higher education in Sweden and how these "shared senses" might constitute a basis for the vice chancellors' common policy and action.

## Background

Ever since the signing of the Bologna agreement, there has been a strong movement towards comparability between, and quality assurance of, the member nations' higher education systems (c.f. the chapter "[Europe in Sweden](#)"). On the European level, 50 agencies in 28 countries were being monitored by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) in spring 2019. On the national level, the higher education reform of 1993 (Government Bill [1992/1993:1](#)) established a new national agency responsible for auditing the HEIs' quality assurance and development programmes. In addition to this external control mechanism, the Higher Education Act and Higher Education Ordinance demands functional forms for quality assurance within all Swedish HEIs. Thus, each HEI is obliged to organise an internal system for QA and programmes for quality development.

The higher education reform of 1993 changed many activities in all Swedish HEIs. Bauer ([1996](#)) has argued that the reform clearly expressed "a shift from steering mainly by rules and regulations, to a steering by goals and results" (p. 78). In an interview study of faculty and leadership from six disciplines at three Swedish universities, Bauer ([1996](#)) found that vice chancellors and heads of university administration were generally receptive to the reform's intentions to provide more freedom and authority to the universities, "even though several suggest that much of it is illusory and superficial" (Bauer [1996](#), p. 78). The widened autonomy was also followed by "increasing demands on their local statutes, more decisions, and adherent internal conflicts" (*ibid.*).

Today, Swedish vice chancellors and HEI teachers and staff have lived with, and seemingly become used to, many and increasingly extensive and significant external and internal EQA systems for 25 years.<sup>3</sup> Besides the 2011–2014 EQA system, the compulsory EQA systems as such have not been subject to protests. When the 2011–2014 EQA system was imposed (in which the control function prevailed and the agency's judgement was built on reviewing the students' independent degree

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<sup>3</sup>As we have demonstrated in the chapter "[National Evaluation Systems](#)", most of the national EQA systems evaluated the HEIs' internal quality assurance systems (IQAs).

projects), many of the vice chancellors objected. The system was heavily criticised in the media, foremost by the vice chancellors' network ASHEI. In the chapter "[Hayek and the Red Tape: The Politics of Evaluation and Quality Assurance Reform – From Shortcut Governing to Policy Rerouting](#)", we give a more detailed analysis of the political processes leading up to the two more recent EQA systems.

Sweden is, of course, not unique in the above changes in governance. As we have demonstrated elsewhere (see Segerholm et al. 2014), the transformation of higher education in Sweden appears to follow these international trends. Jarvis (2014) argues that "QA regimes are not benign managerial instruments – they must also be understood as part of a broader series of agendas associated with neo-liberal policy prescriptions that valorise market rationality" (p. 164).

Liedman (2009) provides a historical expose of the transformation of the Swedish university. In a very condensed version, during the 1950s and 1960s, the *collegial* organisation received competition from *bureaucratic* organisation entering the Swedish universities, bringing with it a formalised and growing economic administration and several new sections, for planning and staff, for example. It also meant more power being transferred from the professors to the head of the departments. Another layer during the late 1960s and 1970s was the idea of *democratisation*, chiefly in the sense of student influence or, more accurately, representation in the departments' new boards. Today, these boards have mostly been abolished, but students still can be represented in education programme committees and in boards at the faculty level. The next layer entering the HEIs in the 1980s and 1990s was a focus on *leadership* and the importance of charismatic leaders for the HEIs, faculties, and departments. From the beginning of the twenty-first century, the *entrepreneur* made its entrance into the HEIs and contributed to a shift, where "higher education and research is a central part of the surrounding business world, yes maybe the most important engine" (Liedman 2009, p. 9). With the Bologna agreement, the ties between higher education and the business world were strengthened, and *employability* became the new buzzword.

The transformation of higher education in Sweden has been subject to much debate within the academy, above all among social scientists. Conferences have been arranged, and books and special feature issues have been published, on the transformed field of HEIs (e.g. Rider et al. 2013; Ahlbäck Öberg et al. 2016; Karlsruhn 2016; Wedlin et al. 2017). Even a novel taking place at an old university – with the sub-heading "When the university lost its freedom", authored by a former political science professor – debates these changes (Lewin 2017). In their analysis of Swedish higher education policy texts from 1992 to 2007, Ljunggren and Öst (2008) found that the language in higher education policy has been reduced over time, "owing to the hegemonic tendencies of the discourse of economic globalization" (p. 13). Traditional academic ideals and justifications had been superseded in favour of this discourse and whose new key words include economic development, competition, mobility, comparability, and life-long learning. Hasselberg et al. (2013) further discusses professionalism and discretion and argues that professionals today have been turned into administrators: they are expected to be "doers" without individual ideas on how things should be done or why. As a result, "the new

professionalism lacks the central ingredient of a value-based standard of good work” (p. 139).

Increasing expectations from outside the academy, external funding bodies, employers, and partners from industry are putting pressure on academic life and work (Elmgren et al. 2016). Hasselberg et al. (2013) argue that the governments’ and regional actors’ ambition is to regulate and adapt the system of higher education and research to meet the demands of the global economy, of employability for the students, and new patents and products for the international market, “the driving force is the production of *knowledge as an engine of economic prosperity and growth*” (Hasselberg et al. 2013, p. 4, italics in original). In a case study of the Swedish Knowledge Foundation (*KK-stiftelsen*) and its mission to modify the new universities (established after 1977) into motors of regional development, Hyvönen (2013) found that the vice chancellors at these HEIs were enthusiastic and optimistic. For instance, the then-chief executive officer of the foundation stressed that “our meetings with the vice chancellors testify to the strong bonds between the vice chancellors and the representatives of the business community” (quoted in Hyvönen 2013, p. 101). These bonds seemed more easily established at the new regional university colleges, where research funding is scarce and cooperation with local businesses may be appealing.

The transformed field of higher education will most likely change the notion of quality as well. Hasselberg et al. (2013) predict that quality evolves into a supply and demand definition, i.e. “the notion of quality and demand merge” (p. 3).

As have been shown, quality in higher education has for long been an object of interest yet elusive and hard to exhaustively define. Scholars have identified many aspects when trying to capture the essence of quality. Harvey and Green (1993), for example, gave an account of five basic forms, while Dahler-Larsen (2008) investigated five perspectives on quality by analysing which quality criteria, types of problem, operationalisations, forms of normativity, and matters of avoidance they represent. Cole (2011) discussed educational quality in terms of research and teaching and suggested 13 quality indicators.

In Sweden, the government’s higher education reform bill of 1993 (Government Bill 1992/1993:1), which had the subtitle “Freedom for quality”, was motivated by a need to strengthen Sweden as a “nation of knowledge” (Bauer 1996, p. 77). Bauer (1996) found that the university leadership often expressed quality in terms of basic, solid work and a conscious ambition to develop this work, as an improvement that must come from within the university. They problematised the balancing between the internal academic criteria and the external societal demands, and “[n]o one directly formulated quality in terms of goal- fulfilment” (Bauer 1996, p. 78). To ensure and enhance quality, the university leadership emphasised dialogue between teachers as well as between teachers and students. The teachers, on the other hand, demonstrated great uncertainty when asked about quality in higher education and also admitted that they had not thought much about it. When answering questions about quality, the most common answer was that quality is related to the connection between research and teaching. Bauer (1996) commented that quality “is often taken for granted in the university” (p. 79). This is hardly the case for Swedish

university teachers today after taking part in internal quality assurance (IQA) and national EQA systems since the beginning of the 1990s.

In the next section, the method and data will be set out, and the contemporary Swedish higher education landscape as described by the vice chancellors' will be presented.

## Methodology and Data

Marshall (1985) underlines the potential of using interviews as a way of entering into the assumptive worlds of the interviewees:

Using their utterances as a key to understanding their assumptive worlds will provide insights into policymakers' worldviews, their ways of understanding and wending their way through their own world to achieve their own ends. (Marshall 1985, pp. 9–10)

Following Marshall et al. (1985), who interviewed policy makers, we argue that our interviews with vice chancellors reflect “[h]ow these elite act, with what understanding, values, and senses of what is possible and proper” (Marshall et al. 1985, p. 93). They have common experiences and values related to their previous academic history and current situation. In line with Marshall et al.’s argument about policy makers’ assumptive worlds, we assume that vice chancellors’ perspectives on higher education “limit the range of options and focus debate within certain understood priorities” (Marshall et al. 1985, p. 110). Assumptive worlds reflect shared meanings that, in this case, represent the vice chancellors’ common sense and help them decide what is appropriate and possible and what is not. This also involves a common language that reflects a “taken-for-granted framework within which policy making occurs” (Marshall et al. 1985, p. 91).

Also arguing for studies of meanings and beliefs, Bevir (2013, p. 70) encourages social science researchers to focus on “the social construction of practices through the ability of situated individuals to create and act on meanings”. The decentred approach he offers is aimed at studying social life through the meanings “that infuse the beliefs and practices of individual actors” (p. 70).

It is to reveal the contingent and conflicting beliefs that inform the diverse actions that constitute any domain of social life. (Bevir 2013, p. 70)

During spring and autumn 2014, we interviewed 33 vice chancellors of Swedish HEIs. The interview questions forming the basis for this chapter were: What is a university/university college? What makes it a university/university college? What is quality in higher education? How is it possible to reach that quality (i.e. quality as described by the informant)? Can evaluation and quality assurance enhance the quality of higher education? When asked these rather wide questions, the vice chancellors often appeared surprised and a bit disturbed or confused. Like the university teachers in the beginning of the 1990s (Bauer 1996), they seemed unprepared and not used to talk about higher education and quality in this (abstract) way.

The vice chancellors' answers were analysed at three separate occasions: one for identifying the different ideas of the university, one for arriving at the different views of quality in HE, and finally one for determining their line of reasoning about EQA. A merger of the two first analyses is presented in this chapter, forming the Swedish higher education landscape, which is described as comprising four diverse regions. The analysis of their views on evaluation and quality assurance will then follow as a special aspect of this landscape. Quotations from the vice chancellors are used to illustrate the different regions.

## **The Higher Education Landscape According to the Vice Chancellors**

The vice chancellors are navigating their institutions through the previously described changed governing of Swedish higher education. In the following, we present the different ideas on higher education expressed by the vice chancellors. We will present them metaphorically as different regions within the higher education landscape. We focus on the qualitative differences that constitute the contemporary higher education landscape in Sweden, rather than on giving a quantitative account of how many vice chancellors represent each perspective. The vice chancellors sometimes moved across this landscape and expressed more than one perspective. Overall, the vice chancellors understood the HE landscape as fulfilling the task of producing new knowledge and communicating it to new generations. This was often the first answer to the question of what a university/university college is. However, when asked to elaborate on their answers, four distinct regions of this landscape appeared.

### ***The University as Freedom and Integrity***

This region accentuates the university idea as one of freedom and integrity for higher education institutions.

That we can protect the freedom to be able to think freely, deciding on content and forms for education and research: that's our question, and that is the important question for a university. (VC 3)

It is essential that the building of new knowledge be driven by researchers and not by politicians or other external interests. The absence of directed research enables the research process to take unpredictable and interesting directions that would not be possible if steered from other instances.

The freedom of research, the possibility to choose both methods and presentation and to a great degree objective and focus: that change, and development of new knowledge are driven by researchers and academics and not by political issues, for example. (VC 31)

The importance of critical dialogues among colleagues was emphasised, as were encountering and confronting knowledge. The university is a place characterised by “a positive, creative, knowledge-focused environment” (VC 6), where different views and perspectives can be brought together. “It should be a kind of melting pot”, meant VC 6.

The free spirit characterising research and collegial dialogue among researchers also benefits the quality of education at HEIs. Quality in higher education means that students should be offered an education that opens up their minds and ways of thinking.

...at a university, you don't educate and teach about truths but widen the students' perspective and teach students to put questions to the surrounding world and also to themselves. That is what I think characterises a university. (VC 13)

Teaching with quality is believed to produce education that generates and advances students' ability to analyse and critically reflect on problems. These abilities should be nurtured during the educational programme and will be generated when acknowledged research is utilised in education, to give students opportunities to develop their reflective abilities by burrowing into research, trying different avenues, and thus critically valuing what they are experiencing: “It's incredibly important that all our teachers, from lecturers to professors, are doing both research and teaching so that our students always get to experience the best” (VC 26). However, this kind of quality, with an education that is deeply rooted in lecturers' own research, is sometimes a problem for the university colleges. Their possibilities for securing research funding, and thereby having lecturers who are both researchers and teachers, are less than those of the universities. One of the vice chancellors from a university college clearly stated that “the reduced funding also causes a deterioration of the possibilities in education” (VC 31).

By graduation, students should manifest sustainable qualities that can be used in future occupations and societal engagements as a whole. Stressing these more generic skills, such as analytical ability, might also mean that universities have to struggle against – and not give in to – commercial and industrial demands that would prefer universities to customise students according to a presently narrow concept:

They [the companies] really would like to have 'turnkey component students' for existing production, students who are directly useful in production today, but I think it's equally important, to say the least, that they are useful or fit the labour market in 10 or 20 years. Therefore, a stable ground is the absolute most important thing to give them. (VC 10)

Evaluating the quality of higher education means providing information of the students' development during the educational process, such as by reviewing if the HEIs “follow up on students' abilities”, including “the ability to make critical analysis” (VC 3).

In a special part of this region of freedom and integrity, quality of higher education meant *refining the unique gifts* with which students enter the education; that is, “they are educated towards creating something out of their own minds” (VC 32).



The first step of reaching quality is an accurate selection process that can succeed in picking the most talented students. In this selection process the initial qualities are specified as technical skill, musical expression, ability to analyse and so on (VC 34)

To strengthen the students' individual talents and visions, the education must give them room to develop their capacities and interests in close encounters with the teachers and with the institutions' research. Students should also meet a lot of different role models and have the opportunity to learn from different ways of practising their speciality.

Quality for us is these different aspects: high quality when they enter [the education]; very high competence in the teachers and material, collaboration, and media; and the surrounding society, the physical nearness to professional experts in their field. (VC 34)

It is important for an educational institution to be up to date and be "perceptive of innovations and support new interesting things" (VC 33). Thereby, the HEIs' freedom to choose their own lines of research is important as well. It is also a matter of time and resources spent tutoring the students for them to gain a certain expertise and confidence in their chosen field. The goal is "[t]hat you become confident and safe in your area, safer, so you grow in your studies" (VC 35). This self-reliance will be built when resources and time are spent on encouraging the students to question and challenge their own creativity and reflect together with supportive and more experienced teachers.

### *The University as Societal Progress*

Close to the above region of the HE landscape characterised by freedom and integrity for HEIs, we found a second region emphasising the HEIs' function of developing the community and being conducive to *societal progress*: "The institutions have an important task in providing society with knowledge and also contribute to positive change in society" (VC 29). In this region, research and tertiary education are emphasised as a driving force for social development and change. Such ideas critically reflect the HEIs' responsibility:

This model with a core of research and education and the task of collaboration and development, of course it has proven historically to be a survivor (...) the characteristics are, you have stability, and you have the freedom to examine our contemporary society, including your own responsible authority, if it is a public university. At the same time, you are perhaps the most vital force for community development and social change. (VC 2)

The HEIs play a key role for national progress due to their efforts to educate the next generation and their search for new knowledge. In this mission, it is important to protect "the academic integrity" (VC 17) to "make our own decisions, so this is a crucial thing for the university" (VC 2). This concern, as we can see, relates to the above presented region in its wish to protect academic integrity. This can therefore be said to constitute a common part of the assumptive worlds among Swedish vice chancellors, a part of their shared meanings or common sense.

This region is characterised by its emphasis on the HEIs' contribution to society through research and education and thereby their commitment to the long-term mission to change society in a positive way.

There is no other actor in society that really can take on this responsibility of bringing together, taking a long-term approach forward: a responsibility the other players can't take because they are more short-term oriented. Politically, or other forces, commercial forces, can't take this responsibility. (VC 9)

Through their long-term and future-oriented research, the HEIs can educate and prepare the next generation with the most recent knowledge. Furthermore, the HEIs must establish and stay in contact with other actors in society and be able to prepare and advance these actors' ability to "utilize the new force that the newly graduated students represent" (VC 9). As such, there is ever-greater pressure on universities to interact with and prepare for a sustainable society as well as "to generate understanding for the important challenges and linkages at hand" (VC 20).

The quality of higher education in this region characterised by development optimism implies an institution with an education that gravitates towards preparing students to become overachievers, based upon international comparison. As one vice chancellor expressed the demands, "Well, of course it is important with a high level of quality internationally and that it can be compared with the best educations internationally" (VC 8). Quality is produced and identified in collaboration and comparison with high-ranking international and national universities and research communities. Well-functioning collaboration enables the international recruitment of skillful teachers, researchers, and students, and to VC 2: "there is nothing like having large international recruitment at your university" (VC 2). Comparison and collaboration with prestigious international universities are important for quality assurance and for setting standards for the universities' internal quality assurance systems, and they also inspire and incentivise improved contributions by the staff and students. In addition, this international collaboration, besides benefitting a university's research, education, and quality assurance, is also seen as enabling Swedish scholars and tutors to "influence the EU agenda for research and education" (VC 2). Evaluations of quality of higher education in this part of the landscape thus involves engaging in qualified international networks, as "they give us advice, we present our strategies and our thoughts to them, and they give us their views on what we should reflect on" (VC 2).

### *The University as Regional Benefit*

A third region in the higher education landscape concerns the *regional benefit* and profitability. This region is somewhat related to the former, in the sense that the knowledge produced at the HEIs should benefit society. However, in contrast to the former region, this region is more directed towards economic and regional profitability. These institutions are important to vitalise the region:

University colleges in this regional perspective have an extremely important role, not least for the supply of competence for key functions in the region. This can be seen, for example, in our catchment area, where 70 per cent of our students come from this region. (VC 26)

This benefit also seems to be mutual. Regional enterprises can be very important for the HEIs. Enterprises and regional driving forces thus indirectly can exercise influence since they can contribute to smaller universities' research and development funding. Hence, HEIs can receive new funding by being receptive to regional needs. One vice chancellor expressed this as follows:

New universities or fairly new university colleges [like ours] are a bit closer to 'put our ears to the ground' and be part of situations where things happen. It is relatively easy to get in contact with us. (VC 30)

Producing "utilizable research" (VC 1) is emphasised as being important and worthwhile, and no contradiction seems to exist between basic and applied research; "the benefit extends from the ivory tower and out to the garage" (VC 25). These benefits may be threatened by the recent merger of smaller HEIs into bigger units, as "[t]hey risk losing the unique regional conditions and it gets worse for the regions" (VC 28).

Also in this region of the HE landscape, quality in higher education can be illustrated as a form of education that conveys to the students an ability to make critical analyses; "these cognitive qualities that the society needs" (VC 30). The HEIs that succeed in doing this perform educations with quality.

### *The University as a State Authority*

The final region in the Swedish higher education landscape characterises HEIs mainly as an official *state authority*. Here lies the formal and assigned commission that vice chancellors as representatives of an authority are obliged to perform, according to the Higher Education Act and Higher Education Ordinance. The HEIs are responsible for producing knowledge and giving students a good education.

It is actually to have an official mission in terms of education and research, and accounting for knowledge production and knowledge transfer, exercised according to constitutional law in terms of quality, research, and education. (VC 24)

Quality in higher education is equated with achieving (or exceeding) the Swedish national goals for higher education. In other words, if students taking a specific programme or degree reach the national goals for that programme or degree, their education has been of high quality. The content and competences are not specified for this kind of quality; rather, such goals were taken for granted. "Quality is related to the goals you specify", and these goals are predefined "[a]ccording to the quality assurance system of the SHEA" (VC 23, both quotes).

As mentioned, quality in education is often taken to be of value to society. However, this region also has conceptions of educational quality that are as valuable to the individual student:

From the point of view of the student's period of study here, education should be as valuable as possible for them from all angles. It should be an investment in their future, and that's the core point in the quality concept: that we make it as good as it can ever be. That it is useful for the student. (VC 14)

This type of quality in higher education can be determined through student questionnaires and course evaluations. The results of these assessments are taken seriously: "if they answer that they have not come in contact with research, we can take a look at these courses" (VC 14). According to the vice chancellors, IQAs and national EQA systems also may identify and help improve the quality of education. Both are developed in agreement with the national and local goals, which therefore means a close follow-up on the goals. The vice chancellors often reported and elaborated on ambitious IQA systems developed by their institutions to anticipate the national evaluation and hopefully adjust the quality of education before being evaluated by the SHEA.

In this section, we have sketched the higher education landscape in Sweden as one comprising four regions. These perspectives of HEIs and quality in higher education constitute the vice chancellors' assumptive worlds, in the sense that they are well known and openly display "what is possible and proper" (Marshall et al. 1985, p. 93). Even though not all of the vice chancellors sympathised with all of these perspectives, in contemporary Sweden, the perspectives are approved ways of stating the idea of the university and thus to base higher education policy on. In the next section, we will take a closer look at the vice chancellors' approaches to EQA.

### *National Evaluation and Quality Assurance*

Can external evaluation and quality assurance promote quality in higher education? In all different regions of the higher education landscape, it seems, according to the vice chancellors, that the national EQA systems are drivers for quality improvement and thus part of the vice chancellors' assumptive worlds. However, the kinds of quality that should be evaluated may differ.

When the interviews were performed, the vice chancellors' most recent experience with external EQA was the national system operating between 2011 and 2014. As described in the chapter "[National Evaluation Systems](#)", this system was heavily criticised by the vice chancellors' own network, the ASHEI. The criticism foremost concerned the strong emphasis placed on students' independent degree projects for deciding the quality of a special educational programme or discipline: "They measure far too narrowly (...) have to look to more breath than the degree project"

(VC 8). Despite this criticism, in their interview answers, the vice chancellors quite often suggested that this national EQA system operated to promote quality anyhow. One motivation behind these somewhat puzzling answers was, “When we know we are going to be evaluated, we shape up” (VC 25). The decisions from the agency are high stakes, and for the HEIs, a fail decision can mean that they will lose their right to award degrees for an education programme or a discipline.

Carrying out the national EQA means initiating many activities at the HEIs. The self-evaluation that has been a compulsory part of all national EQA systems forces the HEIs to examine and describe in detail their own institution and work. Among other things, it makes them reflect on how their HEI is organised and engage in “the collegial academic dialogue about why the results are the way they are, or why it seems to be these effects, how can we understand this?” (VC 24). Another element of the EQA systems that the vice chancellors seemed to appreciate was having external peers looking at and commenting on their HEI: “that someone from the outside takes a look at the work you do is always positive. You catch sight of things you have forgotten” (VC 27). The vice chancellors meant that one important thing for an EQA system is that it is an element that sustains improvement. This statement is related to one of the ENQA’s reasons for excluding the 2011–2014 EQA system, which was that this system did not give any recommendations for improvement (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education 2012). Most of the vice chancellors endorsed this critique: “it was explicitly not enhancing but controlling” (VC 1). “It gave a very meagre material for quality enhancement” (VC 6). Instead, the vice chancellors wished for an evaluation and a report with recommendations that they could use directly for improving their internal quality assurance. This was also the intention in a proposition sent to the Ministry of Education from the ASHEI in 2014.

Where the national EQA system directs its interest is of great significance, and the vice chancellors had proposals for other important matters to evaluate, including more qualitative aspects like whether the students develop their independence during their studies. Furthermore, concerning the EQA system’s focus, some of the vice chancellors had noticed that when the students’ independent degree projects were the focus of the national system, many HEIs invested their efforts into preparing the students for this exercise. This can be an example of the direct governing effect that the EQA systems have on the HEIs – that is, what the EQA system checks for is also what the HEIs put their resources on. As a consequence, one of the vice chancellors remarked that from the perspective of the national agency responsible for the EQA system, it can be a good idea to shift the EQA systems’ focus once in a while because the institutions learn how to master and fill in templates and forms in order to be approved.

Finally, a critical remark on the time and resources put on EQA was that it risks taking so much from the HEIs’ resources, “at the expense of other parts and [may] not at all work for enhancing the quality” (VC 1).

## A Changed Higher Education Landscape

As we can see, the different regions of the higher education landscape in Sweden, as analysed from the vice chancellors' statements, in many respects mirrors the historical exposé presented by Liedman (2009). The various and, to some extent, opposing layers representing different times in the transformation of Swedish higher education still seem to exist side by side among the vice chancellors. The traditional Humboldtian ideals of independently formulated problems for research and education are found in many of the described parts of the higher education landscape, despite their obvious challenge to parts more positive towards external cooperation, influence, and research funding. However, none of the presented regions are unknown to the vice chancellors – they are all features of the university's history and of official higher education policy. Thereby, they are also parts of the vice chancellors' assumptive worlds – that is:

a shared sense of what is appropriate in action, interaction and choice. That sense is inculcated through socialization in their distinct policy culture, and it always affects policy making. (Marshall et al. 1985, p. 90)

Bevir (2013) talks about traditions in a similar manner, as “a set of theories, narratives, and associated practices that people inherit and that then forms the background against which they hold beliefs and perform actions” (p. 50). The vice chancellors' assumptive worlds can, taken together, be said to compose the historical tradition and background of the different regions. With this shared sense or common tradition, it is less surprising that the vice chancellors, despite the somewhat opposing positions in the higher education landscape, could become united in their critique of the 2011–2014 national EQA system. Moreover, they successfully joined in a collective proposition to the government, which was also published in the public press. The new 2016 national EQA system displayed a great resemblance to the ASHEI proposition.

The part of the freedom and integrity region that identifies quality in higher education as the institution's capacity to refine the unique gifts that the students bring with them when entering the education represents aesthetic institutions. With the stress on close encounters and dialogue between teachers and students, the aesthetic institutions seemed to be the only ones that still could uphold the traditional ideals of an education that closely follows and encourages each student's development. None of the vice chancellors representing other HEIs expressed this view of quality in higher education. However, in the beginning of the 1990s, the vice chancellors and heads of university administration still identified the dialogue among teachers and between teachers and students as “a necessary prerequisite for assuring and enhancing quality” (Bauer 1996, p. 78). So, in this respect, the vice chancellors' views of how to reach quality in higher education seem to have changed since the 1990s.

The more traditional ideas of the university, as represented by the first two regions of the higher education landscape – *freedom and integrity* and *societal progress* – both stress the importance of HEI autonomy and collegial influence in

directing research and education. When the future of Swedish universities was debated recently in a seminar arranged by Uppsala University, the participating vice chancellors were critical of the lack of autonomy for Swedish universities and university colleges. A recent study by Karran et al. (2017), comparing autonomy for universities in European countries utilising 37 parameters, places Sweden very low on autonomy, at number 22 out of 28 countries. The ASHEI, the vice chancellors network, initiated a discussion on a long-term perspective on autonomy through a new report (Classon 2018). This issue might be the next area for the ASHEI and the vice chancellors' assumptive worlds to collectively play an important role in order to elaborate joint policies.

In Liedmans' (2009) historical exposé, the collegial organisation at the university was followed by a bureaucratic one and by a stress on leadership and on entrepreneurial progress. These layers can be compared with the two parts of the HE landscape representing *regional benefit* and the university as a *state authority*. The former implies that the new smaller university colleges need to be open to the interests of regional businesses to gain research funding. Hyvönen (2013) argues that they are embedded in an ideology of economic growth, in which:

commercialised research will lead to successful innovations. Innovations are good because they promote economic growth. Economic growth, in turn, secures welfare and general prosperity. Everybody wants that. Hence, everybody must work for greater economic growth. (Hyvönen 2013, p. 107)

The majority of public grants end up with the larger old universities, and the smaller university colleges increasingly have to rely on external grants from foundations, local authorities, county councils, and private companies, “funders that tend to make far reaching demands on what research should be prioritised and how it should be conducted” (Hyvönen 2013, p. 107). Problems at the regional and national levels are increasingly viewed as something for the HEIs to deal with, with the demands for solutions becoming part of the definition of quality in higher education. As Hasselberg et al. (2013) expressed it, “the notion of quality and demand merge” (p. 3).

Another of the newer regions of the HE landscape – the university as a state authority and, following this, the vice chancellor as an administrator of the university's capacity to live up to the national goals – can be related to the new professionalism and loss of discretion discussed by Hasselberg et al. (2013). As leaders of the HEIs, the vice chancellors are not expected to be led by professional values and ideals of good work. Instead, “professional judgement is replaced by rules, regulations, standards, management, etc.” (Hasselberg et al. 2013, p. 140). As mentioned earlier, when interviewed, the vice chancellors seemed a bit unprepared for the wide questions about what characterises a university/university college and what quality in higher education is. This reaction might also be related to the vice chancellors' new role as administrators. When interviewed in the beginning of the 1990s (Bauer 1996), the vice chancellors and heads of administrations did not seem to have problems with the quality question, in contrast with the teachers at that time.

After about 25 years in Sweden, the permanence and repetitiveness of national EQA systems, which Dahler-Larsen (2011) argues is one characteristic of evaluation machines, seems to have become an obvious part of the Swedish vice chancellors' duties and of their assumptive worlds. None of the vice chancellors maintained that the national EQA systems should be abolished. This can serve as a reminder of the Swedish history of it building its welfare state and the trust that was built among the citizens in relation to the state at the same time (see the chapter "[Governing by Evaluation: Setting the Scene](#)"; Larsson et al. 2012). The vice chancellors are part of this history, and their embodied knowledge (Freeman and Sturdy 2014) may hold traces of this trust, in turn legitimatising the national EQA systems, which are enacted with their cooperation at their HEIs and with other HEIs.

The governing potential of national EQA in higher education was notably visible when the 2011–2014 EQA system was in operation. The vice chancellors confirmed this in our interviews and in interviews to evaluate this reform performed by the Danish Centre for Studies in Research and Research Policy (Sørensen and Mejlgård 2014). In both interviews, the vice chancellors commented on the effects of adding extra efforts and resources to the independent degree project courses. This meant that the leadership at the university, faculty, and department levels had to gain insights into the state of these courses. The embodied knowledge of experienced teachers was requested and enacted in planning for improvements to and more resources for courses preparing students for the degree project. However, these redirections of resources also meant a potential loss of resources and quality in other courses.

The 2016 national EQA system, with its focus on the HEIs' internal quality assurance system, instead enforces the vice chancellors and the staff handling these systems, for them to get to know the different parts of their institution, enact this knowledge, and be able to describe their system to the SHEA.

## *Finally*

Evaluation machines direct attention to certain criteria that "help determine what actors should strive to accomplish in a given activity" (Dahler-Larsen 2011, p. 206). As the vice chancellors testified, the 2011–2014 EQA system directed efforts and resources at the independent degree project courses, with a possible loss of quality in other courses. This illustrates what Dahler-Larsen (2012) has defined as constitutive effects.

In this chapter, we have described the Swedish higher education landscape as one with inherent contradictions, older traditional academic ideals coexisting with newer utility, or demand-based perspectives. In the next chapter, we will take a closer look at how these contradicting perspectives have played out in the political process leading up to the latest two national EQA systems.



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