

The Mind of the State

The Politics of University Autonomy in Sweden, 1968-1998

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Abstract

The aim of this dissertation is to explain changing outcomes in higher education policy (relating to university autonomy) in Sweden during the period 1968-1998. The study begins with a review of the range of normative models which outline the relationship between government steering and higher education institutions. Each model results in different degrees of university autonomy, and therefore policy changes in regard to the models provide the empirical focus for the dissertation. In particular, policies related to internal governance, employees and student admissions are investigated.

The behavior of political actors was studied to determine whether governments chose to: 1) negotiate policy with academics and interest groups; 2) follow their party ideology and apply this to higher education policy; or 3) follow more widely accepted, general trends towards government steering of the public sector, such as the techniques associated with "new public management". This political behavior was analyzed by combining policy network models with theories of rational choice and new institutionalism, with three conjectures being applied to the material: 1) in policy communities, political behavior is guided by rules which are normatively institutionalized and thus policy outcomes are stable; 2) in issue networks, there are no rules, and thus political behavior is based on calculations of resources and power, with policy outcomes often very unstable; and 3) in intermediary networks, actors' goal attainment is constrained by rules, but the rules do not determine their preferences, and political behavior may lead to unstable policy outcomes.

The results showed a policy community led by the Social Democrats in the 1970's partially disintegrating into an intermediary network in the 1980's, as new ideas on managing the public sector confronted their previous views on how to manage the universities. Policy change from the intermediary network in the 1980's was often occurring at a slow pace, as changing ideologies were gradually impacting upon the actors' belief systems, constraining their political behavior. Such a movement away from a policy community did not however apply to the topic of student admissions, a topic on which the Social Democratic led policy community had basically remained ideologically unchanged. In issues networks, political behavior was very difficult to predict without knowing in advance the exchange relationships in which the actors were engaged. This led to quite unexpected policy outcomes, as was evidenced in the example of opening student admissions in 1976-77, and the 1997 policy on graduate student admissions. Most important, the data from this dissertation revealed that changes to and from different policy communities resulted in the most dramatic changes in policy outcomes. In summarizing policy-making for the period, governments did not choose to negotiate with academics or students in the 1970's, in the 1980's, new public management trends made a large impact (along with increased concern for academic viewpoints), and in the 1990's, party politics dominated, with ideological positions strongly determining policy outcomes.

Key Words: Sweden, universities, institutional autonomy, governance, new public management, rational choice, new institutionalism, policy networks, political parties, interest groups.