The Swedish Bologna process – reckless race or revitalising reform?

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Abstract

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Late in responding to the Bologna Declaration, Sweden reformed its HE-system during 2006. Thorough changes were launched and carried through in 2007, which gave institutions ten months for the implementation of standards-based curricula and new degrees. In this paper, the national changes are outlined in a social practice perspective. The emerging structure is two and three-tiered, with an interlocking character, so that programmes in the second cycle become part of doctoral programmes. The results reveal differences between institutions concerning grading and degrees, as well as paradoxical consequences for curricular development, as remnants of the old system are preserved by the new legislation.
The Swedish Bologna process – reckless race or revitalising reform?

The Bologna process – from structural to systemic coordination
National higher education systems in Europe are currently undergoing radical restructuring, motivated by the objectives and action lines put forward in the Bologna process (Keeling, 2006). Converging with the Lisbon strategy into a consistent policy framework, the aim is to make Europe the world’s most dynamic and competitive economy, creating a coherent European Knowledge Society. From 2007, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) encompasses 46 nations. This remarkable and voluntary process between a growing number of nations is a unique and unifying political endeavour (Veiga & Amaral, 2006). During the last five years, the Bologna process had a great impact on most aspects of higher education in Europe (Reichert & Tauch, 2005). Of the ten action lines for the process, the first three\(^1\), put forward in the Bologna Declaration 1999, laid the foundation for the structural change now well under way in the EHEA (Bologna Process Stocktaking, 2007). As far as the structural change is concerned, in 2006 82% of 908 European higher education institutions (HEIs) stated that the three cycles are in place, compared to 53% in the survey of 2002 (Crosier, Purser & Smidt, 2007).

From 2003, and later confirmed by the Ministerial meeting in Bergen 2005, the process has increasingly developed a focus on curricular reform. This is underpinned by the close interplay between the overarching Framework for Qualifications in the EHEA and the agreed policy for quality assurance in higher education (BWG-QF, 2005; ENQA, 2005), which both serve to frame curricular aspects of the process. The Trends V Report maintains that: “Although new degree structures are still commonly perceived as the main Bologna goal, there is increasing awareness that the most significant legacy of the process will be a change of educational paradigm across the continent.” (Crosier, Purser & Smidt, 2007, p. 8). The Bologna Stocktaking Report 2007 (p. 3) emphasizes that all the aspects of the Bologna process are interdependent:

“There are two themes that link all the action lines: a focus on learners, and a focus on learning outcomes. If the Bologna Process is to be successful in meeting the needs and expectations of learners, all countries need to use learning outcomes as a basis for their national qualifications frameworks, systems for credit transfer and accumulation, the diploma supplement, recognition of prior learning and quality assurance.”

With the publication of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (European Commission, 2006) the curricular reform in Europe looks like it will soon cover all levels of education. In this overarching process, common concepts and a quite elaborate language for describing learning outcomes, knowledge and competences has developed. In the London Communiqué (2007, p. 2), the Ministers state:

“We underline the importance of curricula reform leading to qualifications better suited both to the needs of the labour market and to further study. Efforts should concentrate in future on removing barriers to access and progression between cycles and on proper implementation of ECTS based on learning outcomes and student workload.”

In the future, certifications of national frameworks for qualifications will be carried through to validate their links to the EHEA Framework (National Qualifications Frameworks Development and Certification, 2007). Thus, the emphasis of the Bologna process has moved from the structural coordination of higher education and implementing the three cycles, to a curricular reform, which presupposes a systemic coordination concerning the way knowledge, learning and teaching are conceptualised: “There is an increasing awareness that a significant outcome of the process will be a move towards student-centred higher education and away from teacher driven provision” (London

\(^1\) The three first action lines are: Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees; Adoption of a system essentially based on two cycles; Establishment of a system of credits (European Commission, 2007).
Communiqué, 2007, p. 2). With some of its roots in the Tuning project (González & Wagenaar, 2003), but also promoted by numerous other educational projects, this development should be pictured as a project constructing a **supra-national meta-curriculum**, covering most aspects of higher education in European countries.

**Implications of systemic changes**

The curricular reform includes the introduction of common European concepts for the framing of educational practices, for instance in national or institutional frameworks. But to replace the concepts we as academics daily use to describe, understand and develop learning and teaching, is not only a “framing” or a “structural” business. It means that we, by using the new concepts, will alter our understanding of the social practices in question, with the further possibility that we might change and improve them by the new understanding created. This is why the curricular reform should be labelled a **systemic change**, since it includes the aim of altering the character of the educational processes, for instance by re-framing the discursive practices from a teacher-oriented to a student-oriented focus (Tauch, 2004; Reichert & Tauch, 2005). As such, it runs deep into the inner core of educational life at institutions and departments. If implemented, the change means that teachers and students will exchange important ingredients of the language and the concepts that they have previously used to make up the social and discursive world of higher education, and replace them with the new “Esperanto” of Bologna: learning outcomes, competence based learning, standards-based curriculum, student work-load and ECTS-credits. However, while structural changes of social practices may be implemented rapidly when legitimate decisions are made, systemic changes build on human learning processes and include consequences for participants’ experiences of meaning, competence and identity (Wenger, 1998). Therefore these changes can not be carried out overnight, as prompt reactions to legitimate decisions. They are sooner lived through, as the hard work of “changing one’s mind”, when preconditions for discursive as well as for social practices change.

Structural and systemic changes are often intertwined in the development of new classification systems (Bowker & Star, 1999). All formal educational practices make use of several classification systems to make learning and teaching visible and valid. Credit systems, frameworks for qualifications and curricular systems are all examples of such classification systems. Local educational practices have often produced classification systems of their own for handling schedules, student work-load, courses or programmes. The Bologna process means both the introduction of new classification systems and the exchange of older types of classifications for new ones in most European HEIs. But above all, the process means the coordination of national and institutional classification systems in higher education by developing several supra-national classification systems at the EHEA-level. And, for this coordination to work, all connected classification systems must have some fundamental concepts in common. Otherwise they can not be linked, compared or validated. The most important of these concepts is **learning outcome**, because it is the ingredient all the different systems developed in the Bologna process have in common. This concept is also the bridge to the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning. With its focus in the learning individual it has to carry a considerable part of the linguistic turn from teacher-oriented to student-oriented educational practices.

**The pace and character of the process**

Countries in the EHEA have approached the Bologna process in many different ways and at varying speed. From an overarching or a bench-marking perspective, different national changes can be viewed as “similar” and successfully moving in the same direction (Bologna Stocktaking, 2005 & 2007). The overall statistics regarding changes in the degree structure may be impressive, but they do not tell the whole story. A closer examination of institutional practice in many countries reveals that strong

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2 Classification systems are a special kind of reification of social practices. Through different classification systems, the social world is ordered by being put into pre-defined “boxes”, regulating time, space, the character of things and/or human knowledge. They work as an aspect both of the social practice and of the structure. In that way they serve as an intermediate concept with the potential of linking human agency to social and organisational structures. They connect and coordinate important aspects of different social practices (Bowker & Star, 1999).
remnants of the old system still persist (Crosier, Purser & Smidt, 2007). With an even closer look, from a social or cultural perspective, it appears that the changes induced often are both entangled and contradictory, as agents on each level in the chain of decisions (nations, HEIs, schools and departments) are interpreting the directives from their specific situation, either as threats or opportunities, to act upon to their own advantage (Neave, 2005; Ash, 2006). “The processes involved are complex and inconsistent, and the potential outcomes are uncertain in their details” (Furlong, 2005, p. 54). When the Bologna process encompasses both structural and systemic changes, the potential complexity increases (Kehm & Teichler, 2006). Countries that started out early re-structuring their higher education might now also have to go through a systemic phase of the continued process, in order to be in line with goals put forward to enhance the European Knowledge Society and live up to the Framework for Qualifications in the EHEA.

Compared to other similar countries, Sweden was late in responding to the call for a structural reform of higher education (Tauch, 2004; Bologna Process Stocktaking, 2005 & 2007). But when at last decisions were made, comprising thorough changes of both structural and systemic nature, the process was very rapid. It reached its climax in 2006, when all national decisions were made. The same year, the new structure was decided on, all syllabi were re-written with a focus on learning outcomes and 700 new two-year Master programmes were designed.

**Aim and approach**

This paper takes a closer look at the intense Bologna process in Sweden during 2006 and the first part of 2007. It attempts to capture some of the initial character of the reform, apprehended as a shift of classifications systems. The aim is to trace the first implementation concerning both structural and systemic aspects, using a social practice perspective to interpret information from national, institutional and departmental sources during the process.

The first part of the analysis is based on official European and Swedish national and institutional documents concerning the Bologna process. The outcomes of this analysis is then linked to different themes, experiences and problems, expressed in and discussed by institutional leaders and academic teachers during the process at twenty Swedish Bologna seminars held during 2006. The seminars were organised both at national and institutional levels to promote the reform. The role of the author in six of the seminars was to be a regular participant, but in fourteen also to be a presenter and discussant focussing on consequences of the reform for teachers’ work with syllabi, learning outcomes and assessment. To support the interpretation of the process at the national level, a one hour tape-recorded interview with the Swedish Bologna Promoter was conducted during early spring 2007. A series of quite detailed questions concerning different aspects of the new legislation was kindly answered by Ministry Officials.

The approach is founded in a social practice perspective, where organisational and educational structures are apprehended as consequences of human agency and knowledgeability. Structure and agency are thus mutually dependent (Giddens, 1984). Communities of practice are the connected spaces of action in which people interact to get certain tasks fulfilled or work done in unique combinations of actions and reifications/artefacts (Wenger, 1998). The consequences of modernity include the increasing possibilities of a separation of time, place and actions, when utilising, for instance, intellectual and electronically mediated tools. This in turn means that social and discursive practices today may expand and become globally coordinated (Giddens, 1991). Such coordination then rests on the development of common accepted classification systems to order the distributed practice (Bowker & Star, 1999). Before the computer era, wide-spread classifications developed at a slow pace, and were closely tied to the coordination of the practical handling of material goods by economics or technology. With the development of the Internet, the possibility to rapidly and vividly share more “soft” and complicated social and discursive practices over big distances has improved drastically. Through this development, higher education as a very complicated social practice, hitherto primarily dependant on interaction in qualified local communities, becomes a possible target for national, continental or even global coordination. In this paper, the Bologna process is regarded as a supra-national political project, which for coordination purposes induces both structural and systemic
changes in educational practices by the introduction of several new classification systems. The amazing progress of the process is not only a question of a driving force fuelled by the increasing economic and social value attached to higher education, but also of bright new preconditions for the rapid design and implementation of qualified classification systems that had emerged towards the end of the 1990’s.

The structural and systemic changes intended by the top-down implementation of the new classification systems developed in the Bologna process might look quite simple and straightforward when scrutinised in theoretical isolation. The different classification systems suggested, encompassing learning outcomes-based qualifications, study periods and credits, together appear as an interconnected and rational curricular framework with its base in a student learning perspective. But to become integrated into actual educational practices, several old classification systems have to be replaced by or adapted to the new ones. And such a change might include a paradigm shift from teacher- or content-centred curricula to student-centred. Or it might not. The outcomes of these encounters are dependent on the local interpretation at each level (national, institutional and departmental), making their own decisions, which might include serious adaptation, superficial application or even adjustments or revisions of the Bologna classifications to fit local needs. When put to practice, the changes might disturb previously smoothly functioning routines. Even when fully welcomed, they also always mean the unlearning of the old, together with the learning of the new conditions for the social practice to continue. Therefore systemic changes are entangled and quite slow. Structural changes may be implemented at a much higher speed; when the actual arena for decisions at any level is opened up just for a short period of time, social or organisational power and academic prestige might be suddenly lost or gained. And as the new classification systems are applied, due to their double nature as boundary objects linking structure and systemic agency, they induce an unforeseen mixture of events with both short- and long-term effects. Therefore the outcomes of the reform will vary with the character of the national and institutional situation and contexts. And since no one can fully predict or control all the changes set in motion by the Bologna process, both intended and unintended outcomes will ensue.

Starting point - Higher education in Sweden
Towards the end of the 1960’s, Sweden created a unitary system for higher education, which besides traditional university education also includes most vocational programmes, such as nursing, paramedic education and teacher training. The whole sector is covered by a comprehensive legal framework in the HE Act and Ordinance. The explicit political intention, supported by a long row of social-democratic governments, was the endeavour to support unity and uniformity (“enhetlighet”) across all institutions in Sweden. An example of this policy is the centralised system for admission to programmes at the national level, with common entrance requirements across institutions for the larger part of the programmes. From 1977 to 1993, the structure of programmes in higher education was firmly regulated at the national level by centrally decided “study plans”. From 1993 onwards, the responsibility for programme structure was transferred to the institutions. Bauer et. al. (1999, p. 258) have noted that an impressive creation of new courses took place after the deregulation of the system.

The undergraduate level includes all academic and professional exams, as well as the one-year master (“magister”), in a one-tier system preceding the four year doctoral education. During the 1990’s, the sector expanded rapidly. In a country with 9 million inhabitants, there are presently 350 000 students registered and approximately 62 000 individuals employed in higher education, whereof half are academic staff. 43% of those born in any given year have embarked on university level studies by the age of 25. The main part (about 95%) of higher education and research is carried out at the 14 state universities and at the 22 state university colleges. There also is a small group of private HEIs partly funded by the state. (Ministry of Education, 2005 & 2006).

At the end of the 1960’s, a general credit-system was introduced, which led to a rapid shift to modular structures. The “course” became the basic entity of all programmes and assessment, and still keeps this status. A course consists of a module with a syllabus. Only courses are assessed and graded. The single teacher appointed “examiner” has the full responsibility for assessment and the grading of students at
the end of the course[^3]. Thus, in Sweden all assessment is framed by a course, and assessment practices are integrated into the teaching and learning of each course/module. No concluding or final exams are allowed for general or professional degrees. The decision to award a full degree is therefore basically an administrative one, verifying that all the required courses are registered as passed. Students can also add extra courses to their degrees, so a general Bachelor may, for instance, actually consist of courses equivalent to four or five years of study. Grades from different courses are not aggregated or summarised to a final grade, which means that the student gets no final mark or grade linked to the Diploma. With the exception of students in professional programmes of a regulated character, such as medicine and psychology, Swedish students did not consistently apply for their diplomas. In the past, it was quite sufficient to show the list of courses passed to the employer. But as the labour market has become more competitive and international contacts have increased, Swedish students are nowadays eager to get degrees and diplomas.

The nature of the Swedish grading system is not formally defined at the national level as either norm- or standards-based[^4]. The scale mentioned as normal is fail/pass/high pass, but HEIs can choose any other system or scale they want. From 1977, HEIs could also choose a grading-scale with only pass/fail if they so wished. Several important professional programmes, leading to recognised professions such as doctor, psychologist or social worker, are in fact graded only pass/fail. Grading practices vary, even within institutions, since faculties and departments can have their own system. Grading of credits more specific than “high pass” is uncommon[^5]. Large groups of academic teachers have no experience of designing and marking assessments with grades other than pass/fail.

Since 1993, common national goals for all professional degrees (but not for general ones) are specified in the HE Ordinance, replacing the nationally decided study plans. These goals, though, are not ascertained in final examinations or in any kind of assessment. They first have to be interpreted and transferred into a syllabus for a regular course in the programme, in order to be assessed. General degrees never had any goals expressed at the level of the degree. Instead, the qualification is acquired by passing the required courses. But before 2007, there were no legal demands on syllabi for the courses to include student learning objectives or expected learning outcomes.

From the beginning of the 90’s, most programmes and degrees have included a thesis or an independent project as the most qualified part of the assessment system, ascertaining integrated knowledge and skills at the level of the degree. But at the same time, the thesis has to be part of the

[^3]: In the Trends IV report, Reichert & Tauch write: “‘modularisation’ is a concept for which no reference documents exist (---). Therefore a huge variety of interpretations of the concept can be found, ranging from defining each single unit (lecture, seminar, etc.) as a module to full-fledged and very elaborate modular systems with interdisciplinary elements.” (p. 15). My suggestion would be to define module with reference to how the assessment system is designed. A module would then be a study period that is carried through and assessed as a whole, regardless of if any assessment covering several modules is carried out later. A fully modularised system would then be like the Swedish one – where only modules are assessed and added up to the degree.

[^4]: In Sweden, norm-based grading was applied both at compulsory school level and in upper secondary education from the end of the 1960’s until 1994, when a shift to standards-based grading took place. The introduction of norm-based grading was underpinned by extensive educational research and was part of the intention to create equal opportunities in the development of the welfare society. The long period of norm-based grading also meant that much of Swedish educational debate and research bypassed the movement to frame educational activities by behavioural goals or student learning objectives. Sweden has been a grading-hesitant culture for several decades. Children at compulsory school level are not graded at all until they reach their seventh year. In March 2007, the new conservative Government (from the election in September 2006) declared a marked shift in the old policies, when setting up a committee to try the introduction both of earlier grading at compulsory level and a new grading-scale with seven levels “like the ECTS” in schools.

[^5]: Programmes in Engineering and Law mostly use five levels in the grading-scale, of which two are fail grades. I do not know of any examples from Swedish HEIs of grading with more than seven levels, including two fail grades.
major subject in the degree, and is thus also framed by a course in this subject, which means that theses in professional programmes often verify only certain aspects of the goals.

The formal curricular system in Swedish HE from 1993 onwards can thus be described as a decentralised, loosely-coupled and modularised system, with very few national regulations or policies concerning teaching, assessment or exams. In most HEIs, the decisions concerning syllabi and assessment have often been made close to the teachers at the department or unit level, where also the local culture of the specialised subject might be strong, and also might work as the main organisational principle for designing courses. The system relies on extensive teacher responsibility for assessment and grading and for the design and maintenance of syllabi. Very few HEIs have developed institutional policies of their own concerning curricular models or assessment policies. These aspects are mostly handled at faculty, or even at department level. And in this decentralised and grading-hesitant curricular culture, educational development is mostly teacher-initiated and varied, often building on a close integration between teaching and assessment. As a consequence, the fulfilment of the systemic aspects of the Bologna process in Sweden will, to a great extent, and almost automatically, be managed as a part of academic teachers’ professional tasks.

Thus, the curricular aspects of the Bologna process in Sweden have nothing to do with introducing a credit system or supporting a modularisation, since these aspects have been in place since several decades. Nor is there any need to reduce the weight of a final examination by arranging for a system of examinations throughout the course of a study programme, as recommended in connection with the intended outcomes of the Bologna process (Kehm & Teichler, 2007). It is rather the other way round. The Swedish assessment system is clearly fully modularised. It could even be described as fragmented and quite invisible on the institutional level (Lindberg-Sand, 2003 & 2005). The challenge in the systemic part of the Bologna process for Sweden emanates from the need to introduce expected learning outcomes, both for courses and degrees, in a way that will show how courses and assessment are aligned with the expected learning outcomes for the relevant degree and level. Another challenge grows from the grading-hesitant educational culture. Could and should the wide-spread tradition of only pass/fail grading survive in the Bologna process? But also, with a short master of one year at the undergraduate level, a varying length of study both for Bachelor and professional degrees, as well as a four-year doctoral education, Sweden clearly still had some work to do to adapt its HE structure to the Bologna goals.

A late introduction of the Bologna process
Sweden was late in responding to the Bologna declaration at the national level, compared to a number of similar countries (Tauch, 2004; Bologna Stocktaking, 2005, p. 101). The first years of the process, a frequently expressed opinion was that Sweden already met most of the recommendations. Somewhat later, the focus was put on actual problems with the international recognition of the one-year Swedish master as a part of the undergraduate level. Still, until 2003, the Bologna process was something going on “out there”. But at the political level, a marked change was noted after the Ministerial meeting in Berlin. A reform of higher education was prepared during 2004, suggested in 2005, and, after a long period of political preparations and negotiations, decided on in 2006. It was to be implemented in 2007 - by then placing Sweden on almost the same active level of change as the other Nordic countries (Bologna Stocktaking, 2007).

A slow start – the Governmental level
When the first Government Report concerning the Bologna process was presented (Ministry of Education, 20046), it included a proposal of a new three-tiered system. But it also put forward that explicit goals for general degrees should be developed and a new credit system introduced. Furthermore, it suggested that the grading system be changed to a standards-based grading scale with 6 Another Ministry report was presented in 2003, as the first part of looking into the structure of Swedish degrees and diplomas – Ds 2003:4/ The “magister” degree in an international view – but at that time this work was not explicitly regarded as part of the Bologna process. It was almost completely framed by a domestic perspective.
seven levels\textsuperscript{7}. The main arguments were that these changes would support the international recognition of Swedish HE and facilitate the mobility of Swedish students.

Though the report outlined thorough structural changes of all HE, the immediate framing both by the mass media and HEIs was concentrated on the suggested grading-scale, since this markedly differed from the assessment traditions in Sweden and the decentralised responsibility for assessment and grading. When looking through the articles describing the Bologna process in the electronic archives of the three biggest daily morning newspapers from 2004-2006, two phenomena are evident. The first is that the biggest reform of Swedish HE carried through since the end of the 1970’s was not treated as big news at all. There are comparatively few articles. The other is that the reform in many cases was framed as “changing to a grading scale with seven levels as the rest of Europe, to prevent problems for Swedish students when their grades are compared with students from other countries.” During 2004, the internal debate in HE often focussed the pros and cons of a new grading system, though even more attention was directed toward the possible conditions for the two-year master degree that was envisaged. This was also because another report from a public commission that was presented at the same time (SOU 2004: 27 – A new doctoral education) had put forward a proposal of shortening the doctoral education to three years. If this proposal were accepted, it would lead to major changes for universities. Still, the HEIs could do nothing but to wait eagerly for the Government bill, since most of the preparations for a new structure had to be very preliminary until decisions were made. And they had to wait for almost one and a half year.

In June 2005, the Government bill “New world – New university” (2004/2005:162) was presented. In this bill, a more thorough version of the Bologna process was described, with a change to the international perspectives as the framing horizon. The earlier proposal of a standards-based “ECTS grading scale” was not part of the bill at all. Though the bill was late, the timetable for the reform was not changed. The main proposals were:

1. Higher education should be divided into three cycles, building on a renewed credit-system and a pre-defined number of credits for each degree\textsuperscript{8}.
2. Degrees both for a one-year and a two-year master should be developed.
3. National descriptions of expected learning outcomes should be introduced for all degrees, both general and professional.
4. The previous requirement of specialisation in a major subject for a degree of Bachelor or Master, expressed as a certain amount of credits in the major subject, should be removed from the degree descriptions, and replaced by expected learning outcomes.
5. The third cycle, research education, should remain the length of four years, but the first year could be replaced by one year of the two-year master degree in the second cycle.

**Prolonged planning – the Parliamentary process and the legislation**

The Parliamentary process was prolonged by problems for the minority social-democratic government to get a majority behind the bill. From a learning perspective, the negotiations made it clear that the other political parties had perhaps not travelled along the same learning trajectory concerning the Bologna process as the Ministry. When decisions at last were made in late February 2006, the opposition changed an important part of the proposal. Point 4 (above) was rejected, while the other points were accepted with minor changes\textsuperscript{9}. Though 2006 was already well under way, the timetable for

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\textsuperscript{7} The proposal raised a fierce debate along two lines, since the report labeled the suggested standards-based grading scale “ECTS-grades”. Many thought this was strange and quite improper regarding the nature of the ECTS-grades. The other part of the debate concerned the Swedish assessment culture, and consisted of clashes between negative and positive conceptions of the grading of students in several levels.

\textsuperscript{8} The professional degrees that are more than three years of length would not have to split their programmes into a Bachelor and then a Master. But all courses in such programmes should be labelled as belonging either to the first or to the second cycle.
the implementation was not changed – 1st of July 2007.

After four more months of preparation, the renewed HE Act and Ordinance were laid down in June 2006 (SFS 2006:173; SFS 2006:1053). The main changes concerned the adjustments of the text to fit the structural change to three cycles. Nothing was changed concerning assessment or grading. Descriptors of the purpose of the education for each of the three cycles were included in the HE Act (§8, §9 a & b). They were not worded as expected learning outcomes, but as general expectations on the quality of the education delivered. The new credit-system was defined as follows: “The scope of education should be described in credits, where full-time studies during one normal study-year of 40 weeks equal to 60 credits.” (HE Ordinance, Chapt. 6, §2). In the English summary of the bill, this is presented as a credit-system compatible with the ECTS. But the definition lacks any relation to expected learning outcomes and does not specify if assessment has to be successfully passed for the credits to be obtained. The Ordinance thus shows a superficial adjustment to the ECTS.

The outstanding difference in the new HE Ordinance compared with the old is its Appendix 2: The Degree Ordinance. Here expected learning outcomes for all degrees are described in great detail. Most degrees have 15-20 separate learning outcomes, sorted in three categories: Knowledge and understanding, Skills and abilities and Judgement and approach (“förhållningssätt”). The outcomes are formulated to show the competence each student is expected to express at the end of the studies to pass and thus obtain the degree. But the Parliamentary decisions also make it necessary to add rules concerning the number of credits needed in the major subject for the general degrees. This requirement, however, had been somewhat transformed compared to the earlier Parliamentary decision. The concept “major subject” was replaced by “major domain of study”, thereby loosening some of the unforeseen Parliamentary ties. Still, HEIs would have to fulfil double demands in constructing new programmes and degrees. This meant that institutions had to manage simultaneously two different systems for describing progress towards the degree, and also that the thesis/independent project for Bachelor and Master degrees should belong to the major domain of study. In this way, the Ordinance constitutes a mixture of the old and the new curricular system, and thereby preserves aspects of the subject-oriented classification of syllabi.

What was surprisingly lacking in the new legislation was a clear approach in how to handle the new detailed demands for expected learning outcomes for different degrees in a national or in an institutional curricular system. In the old HE Ordinance, the “course” was the central element, as described earlier. But all programmes were also stipulated to follow an institutionally decided “study plan”. This plan includes only a record of the courses required and possible rules for the admission to and progression through the programme. It did not have to include programme goals. And for studies towards general degrees, no such plans were required. In the Bologna process, the expected learning outcomes are the central classification elements of any curricular document. Logically, the study plans should be a curricular document on the degree level, and therefore should include the expected learning outcomes for the degree. But no changes at all were made in this part of the Ordinance. Instead a much more detailed legislation concerning the syllabi for all courses in the first and second cycle was laid down. First, the syllabus should include goals for the course expressed as expected learning outcomes. For each course, the syllabus should then include a statement specifying if the course is part of the first or of the second cycle, as well as of what position the course has in relation to the progression towards the degree qualifications for Bachelor as well as for one-year and two-year Master degrees. With this legislation in place, the process was handed over to the institutional level.

The process at the institutional level – the heat is on

9 Point 4 was the part of the bill that applied an understanding of the shift to expected learning outcomes as overarching descriptions of qualifications for degrees and levels. In their counter-proposition, the opposition in fact rejected the central curricular aspect of the Bologna process and voted for the old system.

10 Expected learning outcomes in the Degree Ordinance for general and professional degrees are formulated to express the competence each student should possess to pass the exam. But for syllabi, the expected learning outcomes can be expressed at any level the HEI chooses.
Late in June 2006, when all the necessary national decisions had been made, there was at most 10 months left to the very last moment when the realisation of the reform would have to be presented to prospective students in the catalogues listing courses and programmes offered by the HEIs, considering the application dates of February 1st 2007 for international programmes, and April 15th for national programmes and courses, respectively. The challenge facing HEIs was that of deciding on their new degrees, their curricular system and educational structure within this very limited time frame. They also had to rapidly re-write all their syllabi, specifying expected learning outcomes within programme structures that still remained unclear. The re-designed system will be functioning at the end of August 2007, when the new students arrive. An overview of the timing of the Swedish reform is displayed in Figure 1.

![Figure 1. Timing of the initial stages of the Swedish Bologna process](image)

### Support for the institutional processes

In a special decision for 2006, the Government directed an amount of a little more than 3 million Euros to be shared between all HEIs to support the process at the institutional level. For most HEIs, the amount received was enough to, for instance, employ one Bologna-coordinator. Many academics with responsibilities for the curricular aspects of the reform made some tough jokes about how to spend the money to get all syllabi ready on time. Some HEIs had directed funds of their own to finance part of the development endeavours, but in many cases budget decisions made during 2005 did not include any re-direction of funds to support the process. Most of the tasks including the re-design of courses and planning for new degrees were distributed to academics as an intensified version of their ordinary tasks, without any compensation.

The Swedish Bologna Promoter Group was a very active agent during the whole year. They started out with 16 regional seminars for HEIs’ governance on four topics: Learning outcomes, Progression, Quality assurance and Employability. They ended the year with three national seminars on Educational organisation, Research education and Professional programmes. The seminars explicitly promoted a well elaborated Bologna perspective. At the level of rhetoric, the Swedish reform was described by different representatives from the national level as fully aligned and compatible with the Bologna goals and classifications. The content of the seminars and the themes raised in the discussions probably had an impact on the framing of the process for HEIs. The four initial seminars on learning outcomes clearly directed attention towards the systemic and curricular aspects of the reform.
**Figure 2.** Estimated intensity in work and attention at different organisational levels during 2006.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisational level:</th>
<th>2006: Estimated intensity in work and attention:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National level/Ministry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional governance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools/Faculties</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Departments/teachers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>July</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normal</td>
<td>High</td>
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</tbody>
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**Consequences of the national decisions for the emerging character of structure and system**

All the national decisions taken together created predefined subject links between the first, second and the third cycle in the new *structure* for Swedish higher education. Part of the interconnected character was unintentionally acquired. The interconnections were built up in two steps. In the balancing act to propose both a two-year Master degree and to retain a four-year doctoral programme without increased funding, the Ministry suggested that one of the years in the Master programme should be equated to one year of the doctoral programme. This decision made the development of two-year Masters primarily a concern for those in charge of doctoral education, to make sure that the quality of the courses in the new Master programmes met their standards. Perhaps this is why employability was not always in focus. And since the two-year Master was a new degree, there were almost no others ready to claim the educational territory laid open.\(11\) (Besides, all academic teachers involved in the first cycle were by that time totally overwhelmed with the re-design of syllabi and degrees at that level). In the second step, the Parliament rejection of Point 4 in the proposed bill, made it formally necessary to require a valid subject link between the first and second cycles for all degrees. Now, the primary purpose of the second cycle in the Bologna process should be to support society with important programmes for already qualified people, to increase their research-based competence, allowing them to manage, for instance, new technical developments, sustainability, unforeseen social, organisational or global situations, or to deepen their professional perspective in new domains. In other words, it is intended to be a type of qualification which mostly requires interdisciplinary studies. But looking at the formal aspects of the new Swedish system, the students are not supposed to change the “major domain of study” proceeding from the first to the second, and then to the third cycle. This makes it somewhat troublesome to organise interdisciplinary studies, especially in the second cycle. The new framework therefore has to be treated with considerable organisational creativity concerning the interpretation of the new legal classification “major domain of study”.

The interconnection between the cycles was also reinforced by the initial part of the decision to let all the long professional programmes, belonging to the second cycle, keep their first and second cycle together without offering the students a Bachelor degree. Even though each course in the programme should be place in either the first or second cycle\(12\), these students are in reality part of a two-tier system.

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11 With the important exception of the group of academics in different disciplines, already working to develop international Master programmes.

12 One could believe that this would mean a quite simple structure, where the first three years belong to the first cycle and the following to the second, but several new educational plans for long professional programmes are very complex; courses from different cycles are mixed and thus make it very hard for a “deviant” student who wished to only complete the Bachelor degree.
The one-year Master was well established in Sweden before the reform. Many university colleges also had the permission to arrange programmes for this degree. Popular and established one-year Master degrees in renewed versions will probably continue to attract students. To open a path to doctoral education for these students, a second year will have to be developed, perhaps at a university, which means that the students have to obtain two Master degrees. These students will in reality be part of a four-tiered system. To sum up, the new Swedish structure can be described as two-, three and even four-tiered, dependent on which educational sector is focussed. More importantly, the structure has an interconnected character that makes it difficult for HEIs to follow the HE Ordinance when developing interdisciplinary Master programmes.

Since the end of the 1990’s, the HE Act and Ordinance has regulated the Swedish curricular system as fully modularised. Additionally, in the new version of the HE Act and Ordinance, a very complicated degree structure has been laid down. But all of the new formal requirements that should be fulfilled by the new system are legally connected only to the course. This makes the syllabus for the course the only complete curricular document (including both expected learning outcomes and conditions for learning, teaching and assessment) that is formally required at the institutional level. Among other things, this causes problems when HEIs decide to organise general degrees with a special orientation consisting of separate courses. The HE Act and Ordinance leave two questions unanswered: Should such a degree be framed by locally developed expected learning outcomes for the whole study period? If yes, in which legal document should the goals be published? The new classification systems recommended in the Bologna process are interconnected and rely on the possibility to compare study periods of different length and character with regard to how the different sets of expected learning outcomes for each period are interconnected. But the outcomes have to be part of a complete curricular document for such comparisons to be carried through successfully. In Bologna terms, not even the study plan required in the new Ordinance for programmes is a complete curricular document on the level of the degree, since it does not include learning outcomes. In the long run, this might turn out to be insufficient compared to the Bologna classifications. Quality assurance is more often directed towards programmes and degrees as a focus for evaluative efforts than towards single courses.

Character of the institutional processes
Higher education institutions approached the reform during 2006 in many different ways. Some started the process only at the level of leadership and administration, and did not approach departments and teachers until all the national decisions had been made. Others organised groups of teachers working with syllabi and programme development, several months before the HE Ordinance was laid down. Some HEIs made proactive policy decisions, for instance concerning Master programmes and new grading systems, before the Parliament decision was made. Regardless of how the start had been organised, most ended up in a climax towards the end of 2006 (Figure 2). The narrow time-frame made it necessary for institutions to work with several parallel lines of decisions – syllabi initially often had to be written without administrative support and determined before the structure of programmes or formal conditions for degrees were decided. Subsequently, the syllabi often had to be adjusted to administrative or organisational decisions made afterwards, for instance when the format for syllabi changed.

During the year, it turned out that the systemic changes were quite hard to handle. The step from a decentralised, modular curricular system, where progression towards the goals was treated only as a formal question of which modules could be combined, to a coherent standards-based curricular system, where the set of expected learning outcomes in one course really is qualitatively connected to the set in another, certainly is a slippery one. The only way to coordinate the expected learning outcomes from several courses in a fruitful way is by cooperation between teachers. Both personal resources and time were needed. And these factors were scarce. The process of re-writing syllabi initially proved to be a time-consuming, iterative and confusing endeavour for many academics. An additional complication was that during the reform process, the approval of syllabi was frequently lifted to the next level in the faculty or institutional organisation, where an administrative “correction and coordination” of vast piles of syllabi took place. The syllabi was then returned to the teachers, who perhaps did not see the immediate value of the formal changes made, and sometimes risked to
lose the feeling of professional responsibility for the result. Though the systemic change turned out to be a burdensome challenge for academic staff, it also initiated intense learning processes at different levels. Both teachers and administrators acutely raised their awareness concerning the importance of well-written syllabi for educational development. And at the end of the year, every single syllabus in Swedish higher education was renewed, all programmes revised, and almost 700 two-year Master programmes had been designed. If the courses in all those programmes were filled with students, the volume would equal 28 000 full-time students.

The end of the beginning
At the surface, schools and faculties that already before the reform had established and administratively supported programme structures look like the winners of the race. They already had an infra-structure including cooperation between teachers, to start from. The long professional programmes have had the easiest journey, since they did not have to change the character of their degrees, even though they had to re-write their syllabi. The humanities and social sciences, where the traditions have been “a free choice of studies”, have had the biggest problems to construct their new degrees, since they had to start with a design of a preliminary educational organisation to build their programmes on.

In the course of the reform, Swedish assessment traditions and grading initially were at the centre of attention. When the Government bill did not include a new grading system, these discussions ended, or were replaced by all the other aspects of the reform. But a very noticeable outcome of the reform is the new tendency that institutions decide on new grading systems to be applied to all programmes at the institution. For instance, Stockholm University, together with several other HEIs, has opted for standards-based grading in seven levels. At the same time, Uppsala University has chosen a grading scale in four levels, while several other institutions have decided for three levels, and yet others, like Lund University, have kept the tradition with different scales in different sectors. The variation has increased and comprises new paradoxes, since the same professional degree studied at different institutions now can have a grading in two, three, four or seven levels. So probably the topic of grading will reappear on the agenda when the students start to compare their situations.

Over the last two decades, applications to Swedish higher education institutions and the number of registered students had steadily increased. Adding to the complexity of the reform, in 2005 the number of applicants started to fall, and in 2006 markedly dropped. Also, the numbers of registered students started to fall in 2005. Especially applications to single courses in social science and the humanities decreased with more than 10%. The present good economic situation and a growing domestic labour market have been suggested as the backdrop to the changed pattern. This tendency left institutions and departments in a dangerous dilemma during the rapid renewal of the educational system. Since almost all new degrees and programmes had to be designed and launched immediately, also for competitive reasons, they had no real possibility to get a good estimation of the possible recruitment to the new courses. The narrow time-frame also left far too little time for any campaigns or special information directed to prospective students. From this perspective, the universities’ competitive and rapid production of a wide range of new Master programmes could only be described as a big educational experiment. At the end of June 2007, the newspaper Sydsvenskan reported that of the 63 Master programmes launched at Lund University, with a start in September, half have very few applicants. But the admission procedures are not finished, so it is not yet possible to draw full conclusions in this regard.

The ongoing integration of higher education in Europe that has taken place at an increasing pace (Veiga & Amaral, 2006) should perhaps not be labeled a harmonisation. At a closer look, the connecting of different educational structures and the implementation of new classification systems produce both intended and unintended consequences, and might locally create problematic situations, and even quality setbacks – though the overall process still can be described as successful. The more rapid and enclosing the process is, the more valuable it should be to feed knowledge of the immediate consequences back into the ongoing process. The time-frame hereto afforded – at least in Sweden – appears to be inadequate for the long process of institutional adaptation needed.
The question in the title of this paper – reckless race or revitalising reform? – can therefore be quite easily answered: Both. The prolonged planning phase at the national level, in combination with overly complex regulations concerning degrees, did not leave enough time for the systemic learning process at the institutional level or for adequate information to students, especially concerning the new Master programmes. The quality of the changes in the long run will depend on the continued attention at all levels to follow up curricular changes and unintended consequences of the parallel lines of decisions characterising the first year of implementation.

References


