

# **Leadership praxis and the logic of capital: Accumulated labour and the exploitation of teaching in teaching intensive fields by academic leaders as agents of academic capitalism**

Dennis Beach

## **Abstract**

*Marx identified exploitation as involving asymmetric relationships between individuals or groups who hold different relative positions within the nexus of cultural, political, economic and social power and advantage. Based on a synthesis of critical ethnographic research, the present article provides an analysis of exploitation in an unexpected domain, that of Swedish higher education. Its focus is on one specific part of the higher education field, that of local trust-based leadership and its management of the Swedish government block grant for research, at three higher education institutions. Using mainly auto- and meta-ethnographic methods, and looking specifically at data and analyses related to the enactment of recent higher education governance and finance acts, the article uncovers a structure of decision-making that undergirds an exploitation of accumulated labor from teaching intensive fields, through a form of academic capitalism that is adding to the un-evening of the academic field. There are seriously negative effects on teaching intensive fields like teacher education. These fields now struggle to maintain adequate scientific research connections and career opportunities for research-qualified staff whilst seeded fields have difficulty finding qualified staff to teach undergraduate courses and programs. The patterns of extraction and redistribution have clear links to the social-class and gender hierarchies of higher education and society in material history and may be an illustration of class and gender injustice.*

*Keywords: academic capitalism, accumulated labour, exploitation, gender, social class*

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## **Introduction**

Academics the world over have a tendency to equate their position and lifestyle with the notion of privilege. Often in combination with colour and gender, there are countless references to white male privilege (Ahmed, 2007; Bhopal, 2016; Bhopal & Henderson, 2021; Marginson, 2016; Pilkington, 2013). Yet whilst this association of academia with privilege often appears in critical articles and journals, it rarely uncovers the mechanisms involved in the development of white-male (upper-class) privileges in higher education and can even disguise and hide other inequalities and injustices (Bhopal, 2020). Exploitation is one of them (Angervall & Beach, 2017; Morley, 2013) and is the subject of the present article. Higher education is not usually analysed as a site of exploitation, but the present article identifies and analyses one example. It is a form of academic capitalism as denoted by Slaughter and Leslie (1997) to describe the ways public HEIs respond to national political tendencies to treat higher education development as a subset of economic development.

The example of academic capitalism explored in the article is that of the extraction and accumulation of surplus value from a teaching intensive program. It takes place through an internal collection of teaching and research income within HEI central administration and leadership, followed by a process of calculated portioning out of different parts of this income within the organization, through internal economic transfers based on internal redistribution models. Central accumulation and redistribution is unavoidable in a complex organization. The present article's interest is for the accumulation and redistribution of income from the surplus of production for research, a block grant for the direct state contribution (*basbeloppet* in Swedish) to research at Swedish HEIs. The data come from investigations at primarily three HEIs in Sweden, and particularly one of them: a medium sized regional semi-university referred to as University C here and in earlier investigations (e.g. Beach, 2013).

Academic capitalism through the central accumulation and redistribution university income is neither illicit nor found only at University C. On the contrary, it is a dominant modern governance paradigm according to Slaughter and Leslie (1997), and it took place at all three sites in the previous investigations as a matter of praxis (Beach, 2013). Sanctioned by governing boards and based on recommendations from university vice-chancellors and committees of deputy VCs, Deans and economic advisors, it represented a form of common praxis, but one that was very different to praxis in the sense of Marx. As Luxemburg wrote in Ch.8 of *The Russian Revolution*, in Marxism praxis means linking theory and/to practice(s) to contribute to *democratizing* culture and society by challenging entrenched rights and economic relationships, and ruffling the veils of distortion and deception in

class society (Marx and Engels, 1845; Morley, 2013). Board sanctioned practices of extraction, accumulation, and transfer of value, are examples of anti-praxis, not praxis (Beach, 2013). They concentrate power and are destructive toward the key principles of higher education for public good. The present article draws analytical attention to this.

### **Methods: Ethnography and meta-ethnography**

The article combines political text analysis of national inquiry commission reports (SOU documents) and political financing and governance Bills in the higher education research field in Sweden from the 2000s onwards, together with analyses of research on the institution of these reforms. It is in this sense an interpretative analysis of double object constructions: one in policy, one in policy related empirical research. The political text analysis involved applying the principles of critical discourse analysis to political texts. The ethnographic research mainly involved auto- and meta-ethnography.

Auto-ethnography is strongly subjective research (Beach, 2020). Ellis and Bochner (2000) define it as autobiographical ethnography and a form of multi-layered research connecting the personal to the cultural by focusing inwardly on how the self is moved by personal social and cultural events in (existential) conditions (Beach, 2020). I experimented with this method during my PhD studies as one variation in what I at the time thought was just ethnography (Beach, 1995). I saw it as a way of gathering data and organising and analysing documentation to produce creative nonfictional writing and analyses that related directly to personal experiences when monitoring academic work and conditions.

Meta-ethnography is a very different type of methodology to auto-ethnography. It is more objective and attempts *to make* interpretative *use* of ethnographic and auto-ethnographic products, in order to extend their generalizability beyond the scope of single case studies (Noblit & Hare, 1988). Whilst auto-ethnography concentrates on intrinsic case study value and vertical analyses of singular experiences, meta-ethnography seeks to make interpretations across individual ethnographic investigations to identify and analyse possibly common features (Beach, 2018, 2020). I used a five-stage approach to meta-ethnography for the present investigation. The first of the steps concerns the identification of relevant ethnographic studies and the other steps represent attempts to interpret and generalize from them (see also Beach et al. 2014):

1. Identifying a relevant sample of research texts related to a research interest
2. Repeated analytical reading of these texts to identify and develop key concepts
3. Checking the relevance of the concepts to each individual work
4. Seeking, identifying and thematising common patterns
5. Developing a thematic synthesis to produce a general claims narrative that pays heed to agency, structural forces, power relations and the role of ideologies, power structures and hegemony in cultural processes and experiences

For the present article, the first body of studies (Table 1, below) were my own investigations.

Bagley, C., & Beach D. (2015). The marginalisation of social justice as a form of knowledge in teacher-education in England. *Policy Futures in Education*, 13(4), 1–15.

Beach, D. (1991). Policy Making. Report from the Department of Education and Education Research, Gothenburg.

Beach, D. (1995). *Making sense of the problems of change: An ethnographic investigation of a teacher education reform*. Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothenburgensis.

Beach, D. (1997). *Symbolic control and power relay: Learning in higher professional education*. Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothenburgensis.

Beach, D. (1999). The problems of education change: working from the ruins of progressive education. *Scandinavian Journal of Education Research*, 43(3), 231–247.

Beach, D. (2000). Continuing problems of teacher education reform. *Scandinavian Journal of Education Research*, 44(3), 275–291.

Beach, D. (Ed.) (2005) Work Package 2. Welfare State Restructuring in Education and Health Care: Implications for the teaching and nursing professions and their professional knowledge. EU Sixth Framework Programme Priority (Citizens), Contract no.: 506493, Professional Knowledge in Education and Health: Restructuring work and life between the state and the citizens in Europe. <http://www.profknow.net/files/results/WP2.pdf>

Beach, D. (2013). Changing higher education: Converging policy-packages and experiences of changing academic work in Sweden. *Journal of Education Policy*, 28(4), 517–533.

Beach, D. (2019). Formación del profesorado, diversidad cultural, justicia social e igualdad: políticas, desafíos y posibilidades abandonadas en la educación de los maestros suecos, *Profesorado: Revista de Currículum y Formación del Profesorado*, 23(4), 26-44.

Beach, D. (2020). Maybe one in a hundred or one in a thousand in the neoliberal, new-managerial university! Aesthetics of experience and the question of transgressive critical thinking, *Ethnography and Education*, online first.

Beach, D., & Bagley, C. (2012). The weakening role of education and the re-traditionalisation of Swedish teacher education, *Oxford Educational Review*, 38, 287–303.

Beach, D., & Bagley, C. (2013). Changing professional discourses in teacher education policy back towards a training paradigm: a comparative study. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 36(3), 379–392.

Beach, D., Bagley, C., Eriksson, A., & Player-Koro, C. (2014). Changing teacher education in Sweden: Using meta-ethnographic analysis to understand and describe policy-making and educational changes. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 44(2), 160–167.

- Beach, D., & Puaca, G. (2014). Changing higher education by reform: Education choices and student identities. *European Journal of Higher Education*, 4(1), 67–79.
- Levinsson, M., Norlund, A., & Beach, D. (2020). Teacher Educators in Neoliberal Times: A Phenomenological Self-Study. *Phenomenology and Practice*, 14(1), 7–23.

Table 1. Personal ethnographic publications related to higher education change

These publications developed across a period of transition during which higher education institutions lost their layers of insulation from external social and economic interests and protection from direct political control (Marginson, 2016; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Clark (1998), Slaughter and Leslie (1997, 2001) and retrospectively Morley (2013) all talked about them as having taken a turn toward entrepreneurial forms of organisation and I extended the data for the meta-ethnography to explore this possibility also in Sweden, by including research by other scholars. The interest was a simple one. Following guidelines established by Noblit and Hare (1988), it was for seeing what other research had to say about these issues and how what they had to say related, conceptually, theoretically and empirically, with my own findings. Agevall and Olofsson (2019a, 2019b, 2020), Angervall (2018), Angervall, Erlandson and Gustafsson (2018), Angervall and Gustafsson (2015a, 2015b), Angervall, Gustafsson and Silfver (2018), Angervall and Silfver (2019), Foss Lindblad and Lindblad (2016), Friberg (2015), Sjöberg (2019) and chapters in Agnafors (2017) formed the initial extension. I then made further comparisons with international research from other countries.

## **Results**

My own publications collectively provided references to an emergent common general domination of the logic of higher education in recent years, by a capitalist logic that combined neoliberal ideology with new public management techniques (Agevall & Olofsson, 2020). However, rather than being exceptional, Swedish higher education changes were in this sense highly typical, as national political responses to global change (Beach, 2013). The following side headings organise the article in its attempt to narrate this and other key findings.

- The unanticipated, unusually un-evening effects of local trust-based management
- Organisational restructuring and the exploitation of academic labour
- Transforming identities and exploitation by dispossession

The first side heading refers to the characteristics of a new technology of management and control whilst the next two refer to sections that go into concrete and contextual details in relation to particular events within the local arena. They provide concrete examples relating to the local management of the internal HEI research financing from the block grant created by the government to ease problems of balance between research and teaching in different fields. The government knew that new modes of competitive funding were at risk of jeopardising research and teaching quality along with career balance in different HE fields, which the local contextual use of the block grant could counteract (Bill 2009/10:149; SOU 2019:6). The results are very clear that in practice local leaders did not do this.

### **The unanticipated, unusually un-evening effects of local trust-based management**

Although usually considered as beacons of justice, HE organisations have always had massive imbalances in terms of social class, ethnicity and gender concerning student program choices, academic careers, and leadership (Angervall & Beach, 2017, 2020; Angervall, Erlandson, & Gustafsson, 2018; Bathmaker, Ingram, & Waller, 2013; Beach & Puaca, 2014; Morley, 2013; Pilkington, 2013). However, what the first set of consistent findings indicated was that these imbalances are increasing, and that the Swedish government had recognised this when providing funding and policies of decentralised goal oriented budgeting for highly qualified local management and administration to try to contain them (SOU 1990:44, 2015:92, 2019:6; Swedish Government Bill 2006/07:43, 2009/10:149). Yet instead of greater balance, imbalances increased and the highly uneven higher education landscape became even more uneven (Agevall & Olofsson, 2019a; Beach, 2013). The *ideal* was that a liberated leadership would take greater responsibility for the directions and fate of higher education institutions by defining their dominant organizational agendas, solutions and values (Beach, 2013). Ekman, Lindgren, and Packendorff (2018) represented the ideal shift as follows:

<p><b>From managerialism as a</b> Technocratic and consumerist performance'- driven hierarchy based on management autonomy and techniques and characterized by collaboration with/in government and 'system'</p>	<p><b>To leaderism as a</b> Custodial community-driven distributed leadership based on strategic local leadership within a government service and characterized by involvement of users and stakeholders</p>
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Table 2. Illustration of shifts of managerialism to leaderism in higher education

The shift towards a trust-based leadership did not pan out in line with government aims as they not only failed to create greater academic balance (Beach, 2013), but coincided with worsened conditions of imbalance and enhanced inequalities (Agevall & Olofsson, 2020; Ekman et al., 2018; Friberg, 2015; SOU 2019:6).

Chapters in an anthology edited by Agnafors (2017) had begun to identify these developments as problems of and from extensive, possibly excessive, commodification in the HE sector. Entrepreneurship and rational alignment had replaced cultural control, they suggested, but leadership practices also often conflicted with ideals of collegiality and academic freedom in ways that ultimately distanced and disengaged people from institutional governance that government policy sought to involve (Agevall & Olofsson, 2020; Ekman et al., 2018). Moreover, the government had expressed worries that new finance reforms might lead to an unevenness that threatened the capabilities of higher education institutions to uphold high scientific quality across all subject areas, courses and programs (Bill 2020/21:60). For the government, better qualified managerial and administration staff was a way to avoid this and the volume of economic university management and administrative staff with degree qualifications rose five-fold at basic and eight-fold at PhD levels, but imbalances continued to grow (Agevall & Olofsson, 2020; Beach, 2013).

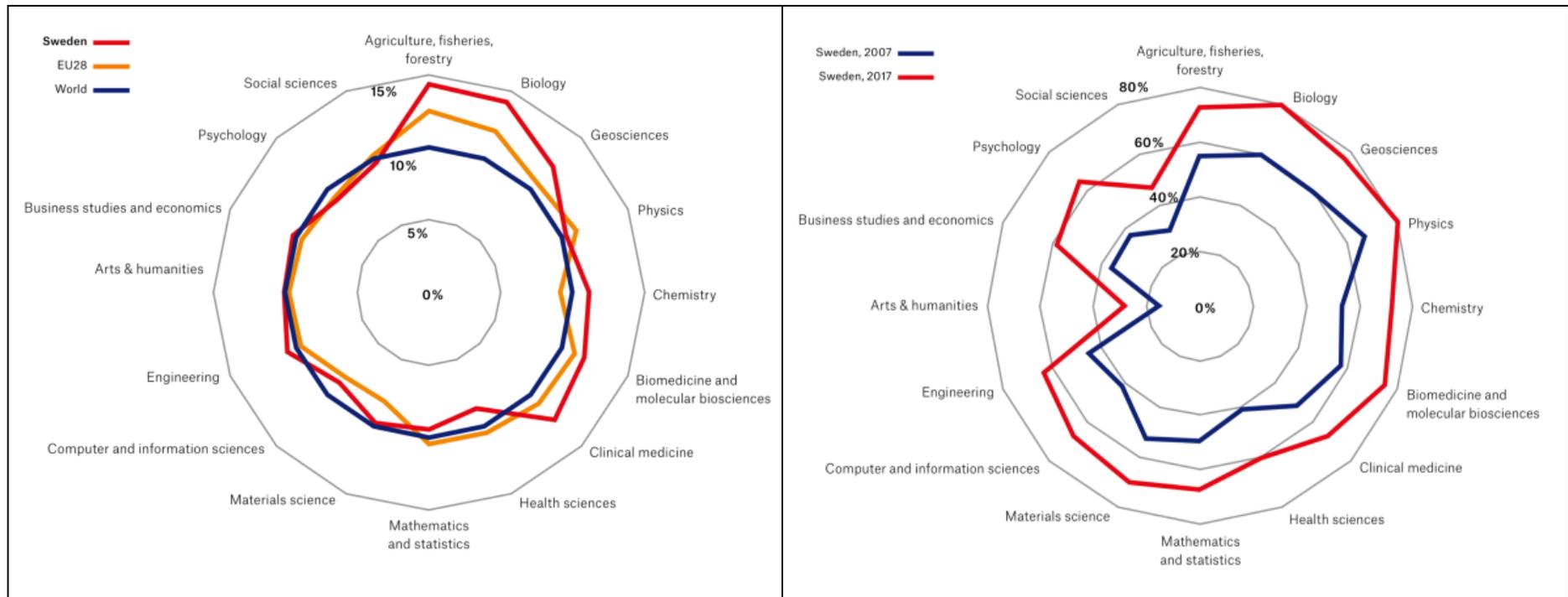


Figure 1. Proportion of highly cited publications within different subject areas (left) and changes in international co-publication (right) among researchers at Swedish HEIs (source vr.se: state of research report 2019).

Figure 1 (above) and 2 (below), which were produced by the Swedish Research Council (Swedish Research Council, 2019), show the expansion of growth inequality clearly. They do so, in relation to relative growth rates of production in different fields (Figure 1), in terms of international publication citations (left hand image) and co-publication (right). These graphs show relative growth proportions in research productivity in different fields, not relative volume of production between fields. They describe a large proportional growth relative to production in highly productive areas (such as STEM, medicine and IT) and low proportional growth in already low producing areas (such as social sciences and humanities) to signal that imbalances in higher education research across different subjects and domains are increasing not decreasing. Figure 1 provides an illustration of how the percentage block grant returns to STEM, Humanities and Social Sciences and Education and Initial Teacher Education (EDITE) appear, and how they add to rather than providing balance for these emerging inequalities of growth.

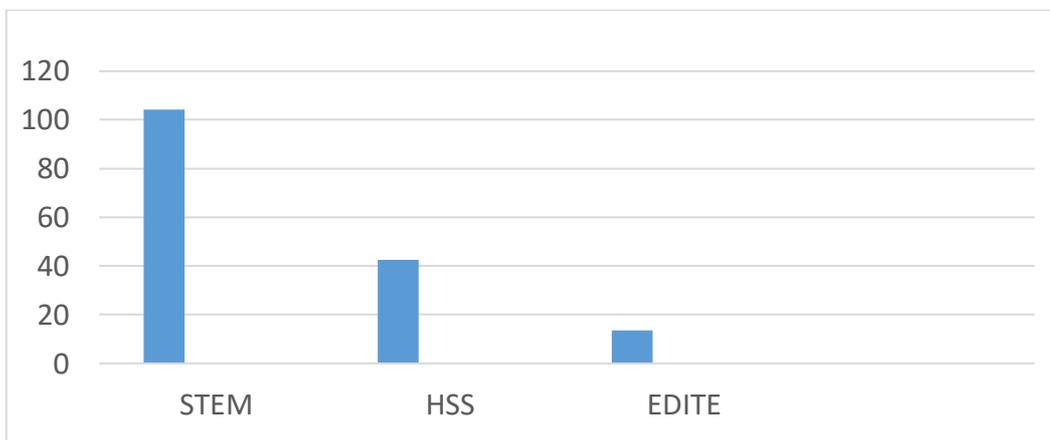


Figure 2. Internal research investment as a percent of block grant per student in three fields

The data for Figure 2 come from 2017 for the average percentage return from the block grant, to three fields (STEM, humanities and social sciences combined and education and teacher education research), per enrolled full-time student (HST) at ten HEIs where student teachers are the largest recruitment group. They show a massive difference in the return per student to STEM compared to other fields: Rather than contributing to greater academic balance between fields, they are actually adding to existing differences. This might seem paradoxical given the government suggestions about their intended function (Bill 2020/21:60). The generated block grant from HSS and EDITE fields is subsidizing research productivity in STEM fields (Beach, 2013; SOU 2019:6). There are five important points of concern here:

- Government reforms had empowered a new leadership and provided them with funds and the trust to run HEIs in balance, but the empowered local leadership made “strategic” decisions to transfer economy for research in ways that added to existing imbalances in research volume between different areas and domains instead.
- Entrusting an empowered leadership with the responsibility of ensuring that all courses, programmes, staff and students belonged to complete academic environments and could guarantee significantly high scientific and professional standards across the curriculum had been a mistake.
- The transfer of capital for research from teaching in teaching-intensive fields is now taking place to such an extent that some areas risk waning on the vine, with less research career development opportunities and subsequently promotion than in other fields, and students who obtain an education of lower scientific quality and weak research grounding.
- Differences within individual universities (between different fields, subjects and domains) were now larger than between different types of university (Beach, 2013) and in line with research findings by Ahmed (2007) and Bhopal (2016), there was also a classed and gendered ethnicity dynamic here as well.
- Class and gender differences that had existed between the inside and outside of the HE-system now existed between those who were included in its different fields, subjects and institutional types (Agevall & Olofsson, 2019b; Beach & Puaca, 2014). Research by amongst others Bhopal and Henderson (2021), Marginson (2016), Morley (2013) and Pilkington (2013) suggest that this characteristic of development in Sweden it may not be completely unique.
- The participation of women, ethnic groups and people with a disability (or simply from working class backgrounds) increased in higher education in the past fifty years, but participation in elite sectors and institutions has remained skewed, and so has the distribution of research time to research qualified academics in different fields.

Sweden’s recent HEI-finance Bill (Bill 2020/21:60) identified these problems and introduced measures to redress them. It recognizes that balance requires adequate financing levels for research connections to uphold adequate career structures and knowledge development and that the percentage return from the block grant presented in Figure 2 shows this does not happen. The government has recently proposed an increase in the block grant to try to compensate and has issued clear directives regarding the internal management of the block grant with respect to

teaching intensive fields (Bill 2020/21:60). It remains to see whether they will be effective.

### **Organisational restructuring and the exploitation of academic labour**

Petter Aasen (2003) wrote that to many observers from the outside Scandinavian countries the national education systems there seem quite similar. However, though there is evidence of a Scandinavian educational model, there are also important differences between institutions and nations he added, as common global turns toward more entrepreneurial HE-systems and institutions from the 1990s, had led to different responses (Aasen, 2003). The previous section confirms this point (Beach, 2013). In Sweden, the government had both initiated a stream of reforms and introduced measures that it hoped that local organisations would use to moderate any dangerously excessive outcomes. Higher education institutions were well-established service institutions (Agevall & Olofsson, 2019a; SOU 1990:44), but being sustainable in the new capitalist economy required business partnerships, greater market orientation, new collaboration, branding and new entrepreneurial identities (Beverungen, Dunne, & Hoedemaekers, 2009). The government expressed its awareness of and caution about these things (Beach, 2013; Bill 2000/01:3, 2000/01:1, 2012/13:30; SOU 1990:44, 2015:70, 2015:92). It was aware that many favoured ideals would be challenged when higher education institutions reconfigured themselves in the national context of an expanding global education market such as that described by Clark (1998), Slaughter and Leslie (1997) and others.

Several of the studies in Table 1 explored the developments of local praxis between the challenge of change and conservation in three different universities. They comprised what Agevall and Olofsson (2019a, 2019b) would describe as two traditional multi-faculty universities (University A and B), where teaching and research income were roughly in balance (50:50) compared to other HEI-types, and one medium sized regional semi-university (University C). Global mimetic reform was not an abstract global event. National policies brought global developments home in ways that had concrete ramifications for and effects at local HEIs. Though the bell of economic determinism often seemed to toll loudest, holding to established academic standards was still desirable within the new customer oriented competitive system of exchange, and the government expressed a desire to keep it that way (Beach, 2013). Tom, a senior economist at University C, expressed a local leadership perspective and response to this at a meeting of the VC Advisory Board (VCAB) in 2009:

The recent Bill [Boost for Research and Innovation (Bill 2008/09:50)] emphasizes competitive research allocations and the importance of external collaboration with industry and commerce ... The current organisation predates the Bill and is not effective. We need to be more flexible to adapt dynamically. (Tom)

What Tom is referring to here is one of a stream of new finance acts in higher education in Sweden to both stimulate changes and stabilize the system in a turbulent period of transition (Agevall & Olofsson, 2019a, 2019b; Beach, 2013; SOU 2015:70; Swedish Research Council, 2019). Sune, the head of The School of Business Economics and IT Education (BEcIT) recognized this and voiced his support for Tom's comment as follows:

We (BEcIT) have to market ourselves activelycc ... We have attracted funding and could get more (but) the current organisation (is a problem). We could get round it by grouping with sections where less external funding is available but that have high teaching levels ... Teacher education for instance. It could help in expanding our total income in competition with other universities ... when we fight over the same resources. (Sune)

Those who disagreed with Sune and Tom recognized what was happening here. They came from the teaching intensive fields (Beach, 2013), but most department heads/deans at the meeting agreed with Sune and Tom:

Creating new mixed departments could improve our total income and access to research funds ... which is of course in all our interests. (Andy, Engineering)

Open opposition to the suggestion came only from the chair of the Teacher Education Board and the Head of the School of Education, who both argued that the suggestion sounded like exploitation. This was an idea for which they got no support however. In fact, Pam, the VC at the time, and Dick, her Deputy, said the comments angered them. They said that:

Of course it isn't (exploitation). We are in the same team [and] what is good for the organization as a whole will benefit everyone. Moreover, the suggestions are also in line

with parliamentary decisions about the financing of research and research quality and cannot be about exploitation. (Pam, VC)

Changes to enable economic flexibility will help us manage government research funding and reward parts of the organization that are performing well ... Some areas have a guaranteed level of income but they are unable to use all of this effectively. Doing so can heighten the profile of the organization, which is fully in line with what the government wants, and will be of benefit to us. (Dick, DVC)

Sune and Andy expressed immediate support. Tom did too, and added that changes were imperative if we were to become more competitive in relation to research funding:

There is no exploitation. It is just a question of being more entrepreneurial and starting to operate more in line with government reforms. (Tom)

These two points, about (i), becoming more entrepreneurial and (ii), operating in line with government reforms, later became almost catchphrases at University C, when leaders promoted and mitigated a reorganisation that began to take place there. Though not wrong according to the wording of reform and regarding the changes implied as necessary by the government, there was little interest expressed for protecting what the government had suggested its concerns about (Beach, 2013). Instead, “entrepreneurial change” in line with government policies very quickly became a hegemonic idea among the leadership groups, with the exception of the Head of the School of Education and the Chair of the Board of Teacher Education respectively. They pointed out that:

Change was not a new phenomenon, but the shift of power and control over rights to define what the university is and should strive to become were, and are unacceptable. They were moving the university as a service provider and former vassal of the state to a more entrepreneurial role without due regard to what was being lost on the way. (Annie, Education Head)

The opposition voiced by Annie and the Chair of Teacher Education did not make any difference to the outcome. In 2014, University C restructured along the lines first introduced by Tom and Sune in 2009, when its six semi-autonomous schools/institutions were broken down into smaller sectors and then “re-clustered” in three new constellations: but for which there was now a new argument (Beach, 2013). There were:

Three new melded Academies that allowed each meld to conduct education at basic, advanced and research degree levels, and form complete academic environments that bring the advantages from areas with research degrees and high levels of research to areas that do not. (University C Audit 2014)

This formulation meant that there were now two arguments for the same organisational change. One of them was a material back-stage discourse from 2009. It described the need and presence of changes in order to generate possibilities for ‘exploiting surplus value from the block grant, to create advantages in competition for external research funding that could increase the total research income’ (e.g. Tom, Sune, Pam). It concerned the issue of ‘necessary research productivity and generating a positive academic brand identity’ (Dick) and was a discourse that was fully in line with academic capitalism in the sense expressed by Slaughter and Leslie (1997). However, the discourse was problematic in that it did not hide the fact that the reorganisation involved exploiting research income generated through teaching in teaching intensive fields (Beach, 2013). The second discourse (which became official from 2014 onwards) evaded this problem entirely. It was idealistic and front-stage as a representation but not entirely in terms of its formation. It described changes as being about:

Bringing advantages of experience from areas with high levels of research and research degrees to sectors where there was less access to funding and difficulties in generating research support. It is a way to create dynamic complete academic environments for all employees, courses and programs and in that way to fulfil the university statues set out by the government and to raise a research profile while also supporting research across all programmes and courses. (Dick, VC, 2014)

The new discourse is equally well in line with Slaughter and Leslie's (1997) concept of academic capitalism as the first. Indeed, it may be more in line, as it not only protects and reflects economic interests but also employs inauthenticity as a way to secure hegemony. The discourse was successful. It enabled the leadership to orchestrate restructuring in 2014 with nothing more than scattered verbal opposition and no form of industrial action. It was mainly in practice that the discourse broke down.

Following restructuring, the education and teacher education sectors (EDTE) formed part of an academy-meld, which I will call Faculty K, together with various sectors and part sectors, from two other schools: Business Economics and IT (BEcIt) and Cultural informatics and librarianship (CIL). These sections had very little in common regarding research interests and the classification and framing of the academic content they taught, and few research staff members at EDTE bought into the official line relating to gains from being part of a complete academic environment. Instead, they questioned this idea as:

Dishonest. It suggests we are weak and benefit from a reorganisation when we are strong and do not ... Interdisciplinary knowledge transfer is unhelpful and none of the other researchers want to help us, as they would lose by this. (Nora, EDTE lecturer and researcher, Spring 2019)

Accumulated labour develops from surplus created by workers and appropriated by capitalists [and it] has a corollary in the collection of research income. Our model allows the central accumulation of surplus and its redistribution to different fields. (Ken, former Dean of Education, University C, interview, Autumn 2013)

Marx wrote that the more wealth a worker produces, the more production increases in power and size, and the poorer the worker becomes. That is what it is like for us. The more we teach, the more we need to teach, because while we are teaching others are researching and we are not. This is alienation. Our labour has become an object and the work we love, i.e. teaching our students, confronts us as something hostile to our interests. (Nigel, University A, Spring 2020)

The leadership is very macho. It reinforces gender power relations and an emphasis on competition with very little space at meetings for exploring social justice issues. Leadership decisions strip us of our research time and funding, which goes to other fields, but there is little or no debate. Women generate a massive research income through teaching but others benefit. I remember how Carl reacted the other week when you confronted him. We do work that serves the interests of others (often men), foremost in technical and commercial areas. The government made a mistake in entrusting the block grant to highly educated local economic controllers and elected leaders. They use it to add to, not even out, existing imbalances. (Carola, University C, Spring 2020)

To recap on what these extracts react to, the University C leadership facilitated a process of accumulation and redistribution of research income from the block grant in three main strategies. These were:

1. By creating organizational restructuring in three mixed academic and administrative sectors instead of six domain specific ones, to ease internal economic transfer;
2. Legitimizing rights of extraction from some fields and giving funds to others by saying this was in line with official government policy;
3. Disguising this process of deliberate extraction behind a new official discourse of change.

The new discourse was thus deeply inauthentic. It involved describing fields without research and research degrees as weak and as benefitting from reorganization when they were strong and were losing. As Beach (2013) suggested, hegemony works this way by inverting common sense and creating alliances that allow one group to hold a position of leadership over others by falsely guaranteeing them certain benefits (Beach, 2020, 2021).

### **Transforming identities and exploitation by dispossession**

Discourses for reorganizing HEIs like the one adopted as the official discourse at University C, make sectors such as EDTE appear to be weak, when they are not and although the message is false, audit brochures from 2014 to 2019 have repeated it.

Why they do so is confusing. EDTE is a strong sector. It generates more income to the university through teaching than other sectors do, and through this teaching, even one of the largest individual research incomes as well. One would expect audit accounts to acknowledge this, but they do not (Beach, 2013). Figure 3 shows the amount of teaching income generated by EDTE at Faculty K compared to Cultural and Business Informatics sectors combined (CBI) for 2017–2019, and through which it generated 55–60% of the block grant for research at the faculty.

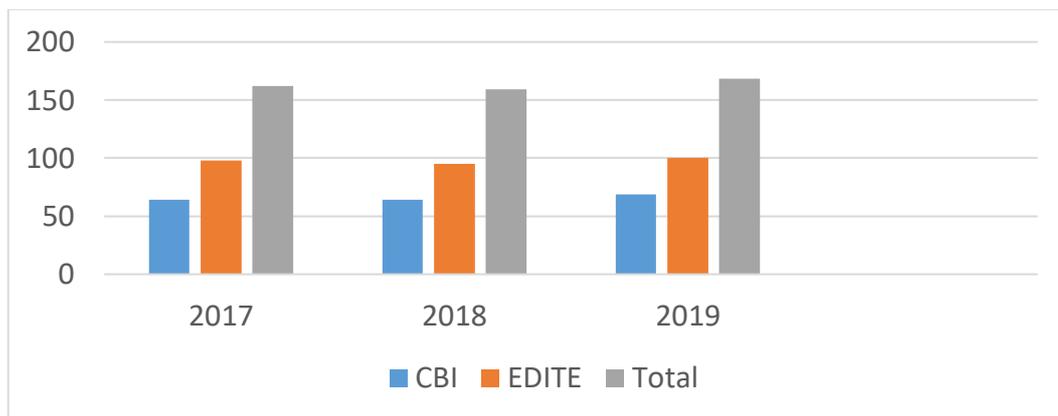


Figure 3. Income from teaching million kronor Faculty K (CBI, EDTE, Total)

The official reorganization discourse accomplished therefore an important discursive function of transforming something strong into something that appeared weak, but material production means that one has to ask how this inversion of value even was possible, let alone successful. Figure 5 (below) gives one possible answer. It shows the other main source of research income at the faculty: i.e. competitive income from “external” grants.

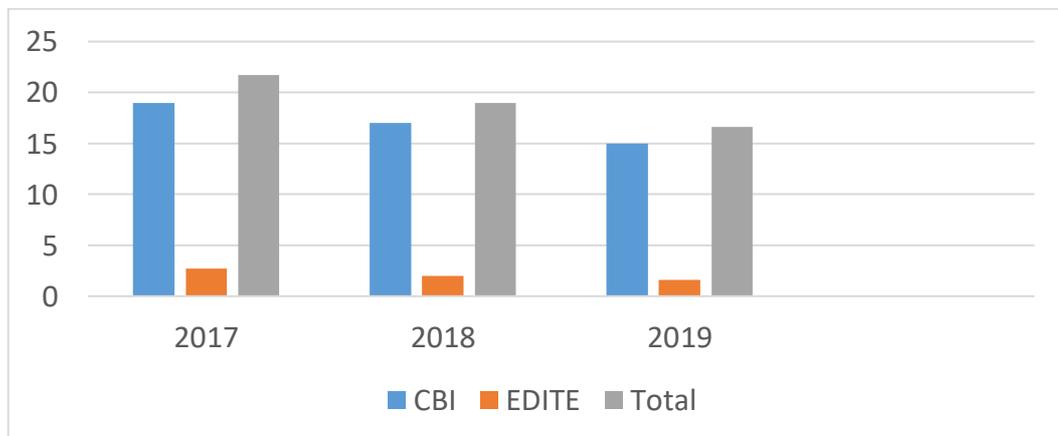


Figure 4. Income (million kronor) Faculty K, externally funded research per annum

Figure 4 shows the external (competitive) grant contributions acquired in 2017–2019 at Faculty K. In Sweden, in humanities and social science sectors usually roughly 20% of generated research income (far less than the block grant) comes from these competitive allocations. They are in the main won through competitive project applications to national funding agencies, such as the Research Council of Sweden (VR), which at University C were termed ‘high priority providers of vital fresh invigorating income from outside the organisation’ (Andy, Dick, Sune, Tom). Obtaining external grants became a priority therefore and an official organizational goal already in 2014, with rewards to academics and sectors in the form of quality top-up payments from the block grant (Audit Brochure, University C, 2014). Tom explained the principle as follows:

The QT connects to research grants. That means that if you generate external income you get more block grant. It is an incentive. The government gives us top ups on the block grant on this basis, and we do the same thing. (Tom, On-line information meeting, Spring 2020)

The possibility of obtaining external grants is however uneven between different fields, with significant opportunities in some fields but not in others, as many applicants compete over a low level of funding volume in some areas (like Humanities and EDTE), whilst fewer applicants do so over larger resources in others (Beach, 2013; SOU 2019:6; Swedish Research Council, 2019). There is in other words significant structural competition imbalance and it makes some fields (and researchers in them) appear to be weak and others strong.

EDTE is one of the most negatively affected areas. It generates between 45 and 50% of the total annual research income to its faculty, but only between 10 and 15% of the external research income. This is not exceptional. Similar figures apply nationally regarding the productivity of the EDTE field in terms of total research income at small and medium sized HEIs with more than 15% of their total intake in teacher education. Yet local redistributions of the block grant mean that 80–85% of this income ends up financing activities other than EDTE research. It has left EDTE dispossessed, with serious questions in national audit reports about the scientific quality of the education (SOU 2019:6). Recent national quality audit exercises graded half of all national teacher education programs (including two at University C) as having low scientific quality.

Discourses that transform identities and define EDTE as weak, by recognising ‘external income as a vital resource’ (Dick), but not recognizing teaching as research-productive, contribute to this problem. ‘They legitimate strategic block grant use to incentivise external applications and shift research

income from areas with low external funding possibilities to ones with more' (Sune), which is exactly the opposite to the block grant intention expressed by the government (Beach, 2013; see e.g. Bill 2008/09:50, 2012/13:30, 2016/17:50, 2020/21:60). They affect fields negatively, but there are also other aspects involved in these processes of contradictory leadership. Gender is one of them and social class is another (Angervall, 2018; Angervall & Beach, 2017, 2020; Angervall, Erlandson, & Gustafsson, 2018; Angervall & Gustafsson, 2015a, 2015b; Angervall, Gustafsson, & Silfver, 2018). The mechanics are as follows.

- EDTE comprises high proportions of female staff and female students from working and lower middle class backgrounds compared to most other areas of the academy;
- Research credentials form foundations for advancement, recognition and status;
- Research subsidies from EDTE to other fields therefore represent a problem of class and gender injustice and structural inequality.

Extraction from the EDTE field has not denied by any senior leaders at University A, B or C. The argument the leadership has used for them has been that they are part of 'the strategic complicated decisions that are in everyone's interests, but that it is not easy to make this transparent for everyone' (Ray, VC, University C, April 2020). This may be the case, and it was of course on this premise that reorganizations took place in 2014 (Beach, 2013). Yet:

If there are common advantages, surely we should expect to see some return on them in our sectors as well. I have not seen any so far. Completely shared costs with equal amounts of return are probably never going to be possible, but the differences seem to be huge. We are effectively paying for other research through the barely translucent application of leadership ideology. (Nigel, Faculty K research leader meeting, Spring 2021)

The leadership is systematically exploiting the accumulated labour of staff and students in EDTE to support research in other areas based on a claimed (but unidentified) general benefit. National regulations allow this to happen, but granting rights to exploit labour does not make it right to do so. (Carola, Faculty K research leader meeting, Spring 2021)

Both the recent governance inquiry report (SOU 2019:6) and the new Finance Bill (Bill 2020/21:60) make similar points to these. However, whilst they avoid being explicit in their leadership critique local education researchers do not:

There is no doubt that the actions of academic leaders and economic managers are unjust and nor is there any doubt about which groups suffer and which benefit, which is neither a new nor particularly Swedish phenomenon. (Carola, Faculty K research leader meeting, Spring 2021)

Research by Bathmaker et al. (2013), and Ball et al. (2002) highlights how higher education enables access to valued capitals more easily and extensively for middle-class compared to working-class students, and they add that the emphasis on competition has extended, not overcome structural injustice (Beach & Puaca, 2014). The present article adds a new dimension to this knowledge in relation to internal economic transfers of the block grant for research in/as “strategic” decisions by local leadership.

## **Discussion**

The present article gives input concerning how government reforms have empowered local academic leaders to make very bad decisions that have had serious negative consequences for the experiences and opportunities created in the HE-system and above all, for the need, value and importance of academic balance as described in government propositions and the higher education statutes. The decisions referred to relate to three things in particular. These are

1. The creation and exploitation of leadership power to enact managerial decisions;
2. A reorganization of departments to facilitate an expedient redistribution of research income generated in teaching intensive domains to others, and;
3. The production of an official discourse to disguise this practice by inverting understandings of the reality of research productivity.

The new discourse has played an important role in securing hegemony for the decisions made by university leadership. It describes research success as due to merit and hard work, not local interpretations of national political documents, and it creates an anticipation that the volume of research in different fields reflects the

generation of research funding there. This is an absolute fallacy. It is the intellectual labour of women teachers and working class students in teaching intensive fields that generates much of the research income at small and medium sized HEIs in Sweden (Agevall & Olofsson, 2019b), which is then exploited to subsidize (male) research careers in other fields (Angervall, 2018; Angervall & Beach, 2017).

Social science research has repeatedly shown these and similar kinds of patterns of injustice, where class stratification and power get in the way of merit (Lynch & O’Riordan, 1998), and where privilege or the lack of it undermines talent, through unwritten rules that lurk beneath the surface of meritocracy (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Morley, 2013). Working class groups and women have always experienced strong limits on their involvement in higher education and though participation has extended and broadened in recent decades, legacies of injustice remain when university leaders and academic managers recommend models for guiding the redistribution of internal funds to university boards in the ways they do. These models are structurally unjust and with the help of discourses that transform identities, they support leaders when they rob some groups of value, income and esteem to give to others.

These are points that two recent national political documents (i.e. Bill 2016/17:50 and SOU 2019:6) also raise, and other important political documents have done so too (such as e.g. SOU 2015:70, 2015:92; Swedish Research Council 2019). They imply that academic leaders (and even individual university boards) may have become complicit in drastically undermining academic balance, and also that they rarely seem interested in offering any resistance, even when exploited areas fare badly on national quality audit assessments and other evaluations (Beach, 2013).

This is a grave recognition in its own right. However, and possibly worse, despite the massive imbalance in the academic field concerning research connections, scientific quality and career structures being brought about, legitimated and protected by interpretations of parliamentary acts by local leadership, these problems have thus far not been identified in this way in any nationally commissioned inquiry report, Government Bill, or quality audit at any university. In fact quite the opposite, blame is located “further down the line” (Agevall & Olofsson, 2020). Governments, their commissions, their decisions and the empowered local delegated leadership they entrust to run the higher education system and individual HEIs are completely untrustworthy (Beach, 2013).

- Parliamentary decisions protected the extraction, accumulation and redistribution of the surplus of production for research by making it legal. However;

- Decisions to adopt a neoliberal logic of capital in the governance of everyday academic life and labour were still local ones that were neither mandatory nor perhaps suitable for most (if any) public universities (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997, 2001);
- These decisions (a) shifted the locus of power from academics to cadres of highly economically educated leaders and administrators, who then (b) made decisions based on a proto-capitalist ideology that (c) failed and (d) rendered others culpable for this and any further problems these decisions brought about in practice (Beach, 2013).

There is no radicalism required in order to acknowledge this situation as problematic (Beverungen et al., 2009). Radicalism is an extreme position that the present situation neither needs nor warrants, as all that needs to happen is that VCs, deputy VCs, Deans, governing boards and economic controllers, take responsibility and begin uphold the values ascribed to public institutions in policy documents and program descriptions by doing what they not doing at present. That is:

- Providing balanced working conditions and career opportunities across the full scope of each and every HEI faculty and domain;
- Giving all students the best possible conditions to achieve program goals across the full curriculum, through education content in educational environments with close connections to research;
- Eliminating all forms of in/equality and guaranteeing access to high quality educations for all students, across the entire HE curriculum.

These are simply the requirements that HEIs need to fulfil in order to satisfy their commitment to the national higher education statutes (Beach, 2013). They are about running a balanced system but this is not happening at present (Agevall & Olofsson, 2019b; SOU 2019:6). Career inequalities between faculties and domains are the most obvious negative outcome, but not the only one. Working-class single parents, new-migrant groups, and individuals with dependents who are unable to leave their home region to go to university (or cannot afford to) suffer as well (Beach & Puaca, 2014), as they do in other national contexts (Lynch & O’Riordan, 1998; Pilkington, 2013). There is no Swedish exceptionalism here.

Recommendations from university leaders to university boards, based on advice from senior economic managers and controllers about how to enable universities to operate more effectively on an entrepreneurial basis are the main destructive force. They have pushed regional semi-universities to focus on commercial and other sectors with a *perceived high exchange-rate value* so that subjects on the left side in Figure 1, such as sociology, pedagogy and humanities,

have subsequently faced and felt closure, one after another, in many new and regional semi universities (Agevall & Olofsson, 2019b). This has left economically poor students unable to study these subjects without leaving their home area (SOU 2019:6). They have to move or “make do” with what is on offer (Beach & Puaca, 2014), which may actually undermine the foundation for the introduction of regional institutions in the first place, and the expansion of the HE-system in the 1960s to 80s. Only elite and metropolitan universities can offer a broad curriculum and a balanced research-teaching ratio to staff in non-commercial fields (Agevall & Olofsson, 2019b; SOU 2019:6), and adults with economic limits or “dependent responsibilities”, living more than commuting distance from these sites, cannot easily access these programs and may not even understand why they need to (Beach & Puaca, 2014). This has undermined the fundamental values of the HE-system and the reason for investments in it (Beach, 2013).

Countering the challenges for obtaining higher education encountered by less mobile socio-economic groups was the official task of the new institutions in the expanded and integrated higher education sector in Sweden from the 1960s onwards. The expressed intention was to contribute to the public good and meeting regional needs (Agevall & Olofsson, 2019a, 2019b; Beach, 2020, 2021), but the contextual ontology of the entrepreneurial turn in national higher education financing, subsequent to the new millennium finance reforms and the golden dawn of an empowered autonomy for local leadership, has broken these aims (Beach, 2013). It has done so most obviously in relation to social class and gender, but also in terms of rural politics as well, toward which the leadership in regional semi-universities has had a large (but increasingly neglected) responsibility (SOU 2019:6).

Academic capitalism has played a significant role in the developments and decisions identified, described, discussed and analysed in the present article. Academic capitalism grew from the entrepreneurial turn. It led to the growth of investment thinking, with potentially negative (and also predicted) effects on former key values of higher education and research in the public interest (Beach, 2013; Bill 2016/17:50). A key mechanism has been competition for external funding under circumstances of competition imbalance and the variations in predicted returns from research investment across and between different fields. Local organizational restructuring played a role too, as did the production of a local discourse to mask the details of exploitation.

The creation and use (or possibly abuse) of leadership responsibility and autonomy as managerial power was though perhaps the main and very contradictory and potentially controversial factor (Beach, 2013; Ekman et al., 2018). It involved challenging and eventually undermining the hegemony of academic research professors through an influx of highly educated education

leaders and economic managers (Agevall & Olofsson, 2020) and the weakening of scientific merit for ascending to HEI governing boards (Beach, 2013). New growth took place in HEIs that favoured already highly seeded fields and this led to extended differences in terms of working conditions, status and research, with strong patterns in relation to social class, gender and their intersectionalities. The government recognized this problem. It introduced, and then also expanded, the block grant to compensate, but local leaders used this grant to add value that extended existing inequalities. Perhaps they did so unjustly too, by exploiting academic labour and income for research generated in teaching intensive fields like EDTE (Beach, 2013).

### **Conclusions**

Ekman et al. (2018) refer to a shift in the relationship between government and universities as leaving a discursive empty space where we know the input and outcomes of university work, but nothing, about leadership practices. The present article gives input concerning what leaders say and do about what can and should be done in higher education and why. It describes that, although academics have a tendency to equate their position and lifestyle with privileges (Ahmed, 2007; Bhopal, 2016; Bhopal & Henderson, 2021), privilege applies to white, male researchers in strong research fields and domains or ones with commercial potential. These academics draw benefits from academic capitalism and the exploitation of teaching intensive fields through local decisions made after the absorption (knowingly or unwittingly) of a government empowered local leadership by capitalist ideology, and the work of senior empowered leaders as agents of academic capitalism (Beach, 2013).

### **Author biography**

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