

## Change in Research Interests and Academic Cultures in Swedish Doctoral Theses 1948 – 2025

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### Research Domains

Postgraduate scholarship and practice (PGSP)

### Abstract

This paper presents the design and some preliminary results from a research project analysing doctoral theses in Education Science from late 1940s to 2025 at one Swedish university. The project is carried out in relation to the Doctoral Education in Educational Research Network (IRN-DER) within the World Education Research Association (WERA).

It has been noted that formation of an academic field primarily occurs through training doctoral researchers within an institutionalized framework. As such, doctoral education is essential for the production and reproduction of academic cultures. This study focusses on how science–society interactions have evolved and influenced academic cultures, here manifested in doctoral theses. The aim is to analyse the formulation of research problems using the notions of ‘epistemic drift’ (Elzinga, 1997) and ‘What’s the problem represented to be’ (Bacchi, 2012).

### Full paper

#### *Introduction and aim*

It has long been recognized that formation of an academic field primarily occurs through training doctoral students within an institutionalized framework (Elmgren et al., 2016; Kuhn, 1962). Thus, doctoral education and doctoral research are testimony of both the production and reproduction of “academic cultures”, that is, the shared norms, values, and practices that shape scholarly communities (c.f. Lindblad, 2022).

This study is part of a larger research project aiming at examining how science-society interactions influence the design, content, and organization of doctoral education, and

what this implies for the formation of academic cultures. Our focus is doctoral education in Education Science in Sweden and its development from the 1950s to the present. In this sub-study we focus on the analysis of doctoral theses published during this period.

Many researchers have pointed to shifts in science-society interactions in general (e.g., Elzinga, 1997; Foss Lindblad & Lindblad, 2019; Gibbons et al., 1994; Nowotny et al., 2003). A growing body of international research shows that doctoral education now faces demands for efficiency, standardised procedures, internationalisation, and greater attention to doctoral researchers' well-being (e.g., Cardoso et al., 2020; Shin, Kehm & Jones, 2018; Yudkewitz, Altbach & de Wit, 2020; Österlind, Denicolo & Apelgren, 2022). Yet, very few studies investigate how intellectual traditions shape doctoral education, how those traditions are reflected in doctoral theses, how they have evolved over the decades. An important exception, and an inspiration for the present paper, is the work of Friedrich and Ku Bradt (2021), who analysed an archive of dissertations written by international doctoral graduates at Columbia Teachers College (USA) between 1900 and 1920, tracing the emergence of a new academic field and a shared international language of educational scholarship and expertise.

The aim of the paper is to analyse how internal (disciplinary) and external (societal, policy, economy) relevance pressures is visible in the theses. We ask:

1. What kinds of knowledge production are prioritized and legitimized over time?
2. Which intellectual traditions and ideas dominate, decline or emerge?

### *Method and conceptual framework*

We have analysed a selection of doctoral theses in Education Science published at one Swedish university. The distribution is as follows: post-WW 2 period up to 1975: (20 theses), 1985 (4 theses); 1995 (5 theses); 2005 (11 theses); 2015 (15 theses); 2024 (12 theses), in total 67 theses. This allows us to trace the movement from "pedagogik" organised as a specific academic discipline, to the development of new doctoral education that today characterise Education Science in Sweden.

Drawing on the analytic concept of "epistemic drift" (Elzinga, 1997) our overarching analytical focus is on how internal and external pressures gradually have reshaped the norms, values, and practices that define academic cultures. For instance, choices regarding research themes, study objects, or acceptable methodologies may "drift" away due to tensions between historical legacies, and the dynamic interplay of internal (academic, disciplinary) and external (societal, political, international, or economic) agendas. Doctoral theses are research products of their time and thus reflect and express signs of academic drifts.

To contextualize this analysis, we refer to Foss Lindblad's & Lindblad's (2016) analyse of relevance regimes as ideal types in Education Science in Sweden:

“institutionalization/academy aspirant”, “expanding”/state intellectual and “contracting/entrepreneur”.

In line with the suggestions from Bacchi and Goldwin (2016), we have drawn selectively from the seven steps of questions in the original WPR (What’s the Problem Represented to be?) approach to policy analysis. The goals with adopting WPR to the doctoral theses are thus to identify, reconstruct, and interrogate ‘problematizations’ of research problems in the analysed theses.

### *Preliminary conclusions*

As in many countries, Swedish doctoral education has since the 1960s been a target of national policy making and ideals produced within international organizations, such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the European Union (Apelgren, Lindblad & Wärvik, 2022; Elmgren et al., 2016). In the doctoral theses, we can trace a movement from a discipline-centred and psychology-oriented field focused on measuring individuals and on nation building, to a policy-responsive and professionally oriented field, and increased collaborations with schools and municipalities.