

M12.1 Raglan Thursday 6 December 15.00 -15.30

This Could be Heaven or this Could be Hell: The changing shape of Swedish higher education from a work place perspective focusing on doctoral researchers (0632)

Marie-Louise Österlind¹, Pam Denicolo² ¹*Kristianstad University, Kristianstad, Sweden*
²*Reading University, United Kingdom*

University teachers belong to the “key” profession, since they educate all other professions (Perkin, 1969). Swedish university teachers and researchers construe their work as important and creative, contributing not only to the development of their students but also to the sustainable development of modern societies (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, 2008). This is particularly so for doctoral researchers in Sweden since they are employed by universities as teaching staff at the same time as being registered on doctoral programmes. They are intended to be the stimulants and developers of future generations of professionals.

Most teachers/researchers and doctoral researchers feel privileged working in the academia, appreciating the freedom, autonomy, inspiration and career options. Even so, they often find themselves in tension between reforms based on managerial logic from the business world and pedagogic processes informed by professional academic logic (Pettersen, 2015). Their autonomy and jurisdiction are threatened by managerial and administrative pressure from within, alongside stakeholder pressure (including from government and the professional bodies) from the outside world. Like other teachers, whose work is better researched, complexity, intensification and frequent change and reorganization can have negative effects on their ability to do a good job, according to professional standards, at the risk of teaching quality and student results. This then impacts on teacher work satisfaction, health and well-being (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, 2008; Swedish Association of University Teachers, 2013). It also impinges on their ability to complete their doctorates in a timely manner as increasingly required by government funding agencies.

There are several health hazards such as: high work load, fragmented work tasks and constant audits within the teaching role; requirements for publication and other scholarly activities in the researcher role; and lack of time and support in both roles. Combinations of these can lead to stress and illness. In most organisations comparatively low sick leave numbers indicate good health. However, in the university sector the figures hide a growing number of teachers and researchers working when ill and compensating for loss of work hours by working during evenings, weekends and vacations. This is problematic since the real figures would serve as important “warning signs” indicating an increased risk for work related, long-term illness. Many doctoral researchers, being in Sweden also academic staff, are experiencing an extra difficult situation. A majority have experienced high or very high stress levels (Doktorandspegeln, 2016). Female doctoral researchers are over-represented in long-term sick leave (Källhammer, 2008). The attributes required of researchers, including doctoral researchers, are passion for research and/or about their topic and discipline with flexibility to cope with the rigours inherent in research (Denicolo, 2018). Maintaining a further important attribute, persistence in the face of challenge, in both strands of their work role is thus doubly difficult. Hence, being a Swedish doctoral researcher, can be “heavenly hell” (Ilar, 2017).

This paper discusses Universities from a workplace perspective, focusing on the complexity experienced and handled by teachers, researchers and doctoral researchers. Introducing a project in which we draw on Kompf & Brown’s (2005) theories of teachers’ personal and professional ideas about practice as superordinate constructs, we explore the core identity (Denicolo, Long and Bradley-Cole 2016) of academic researcher-staff as it relates to the experience of being a good teacher-researcher in the current politico-economic context of higher education. The results, some examples of which will be presented here, will inform recommendations about working conditions and models for higher education policy and practice, designed to improve quality as requested by the Swedish Government (The Government Offices, 2014) by increasing the public-sector professionals’ freedom and discretion.

References

- Denicolo PM (2018). Preparing Postgraduate Researchers for Life beyond the Degree, in [Postgraduate Education in Higher Education](#), Erwee, R, Harmes, M, Harmes M and Danaher P, (eds) Part of the series [University Development and Administration](#), Springer pp 1-18, DOI 10.1007/978-981-10-0468-1_24-1
- Denicolo, P., Long, T., & Bradley-Cole, K. (2016). *Constructivist Approaches and Research Methods: A Practical Guide to Exploring Personal Meanings*. SAGE.
- The Government Offices, (2014). *Ny styrning av välfärden, bortom New Public Management*. <http://www.regeringen.se/artiklar/2015/04/ny-styrning-av-valfarden---bortom-new-publicmanagement/>
- Ilar, A. (2017). *I det fackliga arbetet förändrades också jag själv*. Cronicle in Universitetsläraren. Members' magazine. Swedish Association of University Teachers and Researchers.
- Kompf, M & Brown, A. (2005). Teachers' Personal and Professional Ideals about Practice. In P. Denicolo & M. Kompf. (Eds.). *Teacher Thinking & Professional Action*. London: Routledge.
- Källhammer, E. (2008). *Akademien som arbetsplats: hälsa, ohälsa och karriärmöjligheter ur ett genusperspektiv*. [Academia as a workplace]. Licentiate dissertation, Luleå tekniska universitet.
- Perkin, H. J. (1969). *Key profession: The history of the association of university teachers*. AM Kelley.
- Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, (2008). *Frihetens pris – ett gränslöst arbete*. www.ukambetet.se/download/18.1ff6bf9c146adf4b496775/1404209533515/0822R+Frihetens+pris+ett+gränslöst+arbete+En+tematisk+studie+av+de+akademiska+lärarnas+och+institutionsledarnas+arbetssituation.pdf
- Swedish Association of University Teachers and Researchers, (2013). *SULF:s handlingsprogram för en sammanhållenhögskolepolitik*. <http://www.sulf.se/Documents/Pdfer/%C3%96vriga%20rapporter%20o%20skrifter/sulfshandlingsprogramSLUTLIG.pdf>
- Universitetskanslersämbetet. (2016). *Doktorandspegeln*. Rapport 2016:18. Sweden.