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Outline synopsis

## **Regional development and university policy – a critical review**

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### *Abstract*

Reading documents describing the development of regional planning in the Stockholm region 1952-2002 I found a single reference to my work in one sentence stating that "the professor of regional planning at KTH, Folke Snickars, became chairman of the scientific council and brought several highly qualified researchers from different higher education institutions and universities into the work". That was it in a volume of 250 pages. Was the contribution of research competence of such small value for the regional planning activities? Was my contribution that insignificant? After all, I had performed and directed research intended to be of value for the Stockholm region since the beginning of the 1970s. My computer support systems had been employed for more than 20 years. I had brought people skilled in the negotiations element of planning into the labour market for almost 20 years. I had given advice together with my professorial colleagues from Stockholm University, Stockholm School of Economics, Jönköping International Business School, Uppsala University and Linköping University for almost a decade at the writing of the text. I was simply baffled.

In my university study, I started to search for the research element in the text of regional plans in the period 1952-2002 as it was reflected in the regional plans. Hardly a sign. I looked for universities as the elements treated in the regional plans. Not a sentence. Even in the famous 1966 sketch of a regional plan for the Stockholm region universities were seen as a part of the public services sector for which a location in the semi-central band was proposed. Instead, large segments of the text were spent on locational aspects of the retail sector and the banking sector.

Location issues as the move of Stockholm University from downtown Stockholm to Frescati in the semi-central band were praised. So was the shift in responsibility from the City of Stockholm to the national level. In the national level documents the relocation was a matter of land availability and costs.

Looking at the subsequent regional plans it was only in the 2015 regional development plan for the Stockholm region that the question of universities as elements of the regional infrastructure was dealt with, and, in a minor way. And this is in a context when the three elements of sustainable development, economic, social and environmental had been around since the late 1980s.

There is a simple exception to this lack of insight of what are the most strategic parts of a regional development strategy. This is the book "Universities – the future of regions" written by Åke E Andersson, Björn Hårsman and Jan Linzie on commission from Bo Wijkmark in his capacity as the director of the Stockholm Office of Regional Planning and Urban Transportation.

The national government has continued to regard the location of Södertörn University College as a question of primary concern to the Stockholm region and not for the country as a whole. This is ever more surprising as the establishment of regional universities seems to be regarded as the most successful regional policy not only in Sweden but across Europe. Apparently, this observation does not seem to hold for the intraregional level not even in a region which has a population increase of 40000 persons on average.

These considerations have provided the inspiration to further develop the question of the relation between universities and regional development.

### *1 A theoretical perspective on knowledge infrastructures*

In a spatial perspective infrastructure services are offered to a geographically distributed configuration of users. The utility to users normally decreases with distance. The first property is often termed the network property of infrastructure. The second one refers to the relationship between private and public goods. Infrastructure is not the same as a spatially fixed public good, although there are rather strong connections between the concepts, see Johansson and Snickars (1991). A good can be public on either the supply or the demand side or both. If it is a local public good it will confer utility only locally or within an administratively defined territorial unit. The subway system is an example of a regional public good. So is the Stockholm National City Park, and the green corridors between the development fingers of the Stockholm region. Sports facilities are most often local public goods whereas the distribution network of electricity is a national and to some extent international public good. But what about institutions for higher education and research?

In recent times, the emergence of the internet has challenged the traditional conceptual model of a public good. By offering your own commodity to the internet you will immediately become available to all others already in the club. Your own addition is only the incremental action to link your own node to the rest of the network.

The third part of the definition relates to the functional properties of that capital which we might term infrastructure. The basic feature is that it creates the potential of interaction formulated by geographers as Hägerstrand (1973) as accessibility. The first fundamental property of infrastructure is versatility in use. A road, for instance, can be used for a variety of different activities at a single moment in time. The second fundamental is generality across time. A road stays fixed for a long time which makes it possible for current users to take both short and long term action knowing that the opportunity will remain.

According to the current thinking in public policy for university development the higher education institutions have multiple roles in the development of the

knowledge society. This means that they have been given a special role both as a sector of the public services part of the production system and as a part of public spending. In short, one can say that the infrastructure aspect of the universities as institutional constructs has been more clearly stressed than before. In some countries as for instance Finland this has implied that a special institutional category between public and private has been formed.

## *2 Universities in regional innovation systems*

There is a solid study by Hans Westlund from the early 2000s which can provide a good starting point for the arguments in this chapter. The question of sustainable cities has brought a new attention to the field.

## *3 Universities in the higher education system*

This chapter looks at the role of universities in the education system of society. In a historical perspective universities have been extremely stable institutions of the same level of longevity as the church. A very small number of the universities created in Europe since the Middle Ages have been closed down. It is said that one of the few exceptions is a university in Friesland in the northern part of the Netherlands which was closed by Napoleon to keep the Frisians quiet.

There is a considerable increase in the number of universities created during the 1990s. The initiative has generally come from the national level as a part of the new set of instruments in regional development policy. In most cases, the municipalities and regional governments affected by the establishments have been sluggish in their strategic perception of the new institutions. There is a surprising lack of the higher education institutions as formative elements in the land-use development plans.

The chapter will also look at the notion of a regional university from the point of view of student recruitment and student careers. It is a fact not so well understood that the Stockholm youth to a lesser and lesser degree decide to start their higher education in the home region. At the same time it is also a not so well known fact that almost all of the university graduates in Sweden as a whole in some point in their career end up in the Stockholm labour market. This is especially true for the social sciences.

## *4 Universities in the research production system*

Research is not produced only within the universities but the role of the universities seems to have been strengthened in the later years. One reason is the larger tendency of the R&D intensive enterprises to form alliances with universities in their long-term R&D work.

Universities have increased their competitive edge in bringing basic and applied research to the market. A major reason for this is that modern industry has turned from being footloose to brain-tied. It is essential to understand how far universities should stretch their societal role in solving questions for mankind to promoting the innovative potential of regions. What does this mean for Stockholm's universities as being located in one of the consistently mentioned as the third or fourth most innovative region in the world?

### *5 Universities and networks*

This chapter focuses on the role of universities as communication nodes both in physical terms and in the virtual world. What are the location factors for universities? A large Dutch research programme has addressed these questions for both developed and developing countries, for instance, by scrutinizing the location of 20 new universities in Saudi Arabia.

Another topic to be treated is the emergence and reasons for cooperation between researchers and between universities as well as between universities and firms. Networks work for both students, teachers and researchers and the question is what are the patterns of communication being established in mobility across regions and countries.

### *6 Universities as democratic and cultural institutions*

The chapter dwells on the correspondence between universities and cultural institutions. According to Gregory Ashworth, the recently deceased cultural economist, value creation in the cultural development field rests on the interplay between place providers, cultural institutions, and actors in the visitor industry. In the context of universities we can speak about cities and regions, and researcher networks, as place providers. The cultural institutions are the universities themselves which can be either open or closed to the external environment. The visitor industry can in a sense be applied to the students.

Universities can also be seen as custodians of societal values built on the observation that higher education brings new life styles and new values, into a region. This role of universities has to do with the social component of sustainable development and perceptions of welfare. This may be more important for universities than the contribution to economic development for individuals, regions and nations.

### *7 Leading universities*

This chapter will be based on my experience from belonging to the leadership of KTH for a large number of years and address the correspondence between academic and industrial leadership. I will promote the notion that academic leadership will be ever more important also for the business sector in a knowledge oriented society. Examples will be given from Sweden, Switzerland, UK and the US.

### *8 The future of universities*

Futures studies generally have rather uninteresting views to propose on the future of universities. A change has occurred in the latest decade. There are studies by the Swedish Academy of Engineering Science to be tapped. KTH has been the first Swedish university to create a vision with the help of methods from the futures studies field. But looking into a set of classical studies of the future universities as institutions and custodians for knowledge and learning seem to be scarce. Even the study by Åke E Andersson and Peter Sylwan on "The future of life and work" being the end product of a large futures studies programme avoids the issue of the role of universities and rather puts the emphasis on education as a recurrent life-time trajectory.