

Dagens Nyheter, DN Debatt, August 22, 2007.

“Uppsala University must be Closed Down”

Professor Bo Rothstein: Those in charge of Uppsala University do not respect the fundamental principles required for an educational establishment to be qualified as a university. Vice-Chancellor Anders Hallberg and others in charge at Uppsala University do not respect or not understand the principle of academic freedom. They rather act according to patterns that are common in commercial or political activities. Thereby the educational establishment has disqualified itself as a university. However to degrade it to a college would be mean to all serious colleges around the country. If the new University Chancellor Anders Flodström is going to decrease the number of universities he could conveniently start with Uppsala, writes Bo Rothstein, Professor of Political Science at the University of Gothenburg.

Sweden's new University Chancellor, Anders Flodström, has stirred up a discussion by his statement that the country actually should have just five universities. Since we presently have no less than sixteen universities and a number of colleges which consider themselves to have reached the “maturity” of universities, the issue has caused a commotion.

The question that must be asked is why certain knowledge producing organisations should be considered to be universities. Clearly it is not enough that it is an organisation producing knowledge. Rather a university is an organisation that produces and teaches knowledge according to certain principles. These principles were fixed in a particular document that was drawn up 1988 in Bologna during the 900th anniversary of Europe's oldest university.

Among the central principles fixed in this document is the so called academic freedom, which says that the researchers have the right to freely search for knowledge and freely assert their point of view on what is the foremost, truest and right knowledge within their fields. At a university no manager can order a researcher to maintain a standpoint which he himself does not consider true. The importance of this principle is that search for knowledge should be liberated from political, ideological, economical, religious or similar powers attempts to influence.

Academic freedom does not mean that everything should or may be tolerated. On the contrary, the production of knowledge at a university is guarded by strict rules. Methods and results must be openly and publicly presented. Cheating, plagiarism, falsification or conscious distortion of research results receive no tolerance but is punished severely. It

is in these two accounts that universities differ from ideological think tanks or corporate research institutes.

If the government can scrutinise applications from colleges to obtain the status of universities, it should reasonably be tested whether the present universities fulfil the requirements for being universities. In at least one case it is obvious that this is not the case, namely Uppsala University. During the last year, two so remarkable and grave breaches against the mentioned principles have occurred that I think it is time for the government to withdraw the university status from this educational establishment.

One case started February 8 when Vice-Chancellor Anders Hallberg summoned two professors from the Department of Mathematics and on the spot accused them for misconduct in their duties. They were both offered the alternative to hand in their resignations and in return the issues will be hushed-up and they will get a generous severance pay, or the case will be taken to the disciplinary board in the light of publicity.

In the ensuing debate Vice-Chancellor Hallberg has been forced to withdraw all accusations of misconduct in their duties. In fact they are both internationally distinguished researchers. What it all comes down to is that they had a different opinion of what kind of mathematical research should be carried out and expressed this opinion, that is they have asserted their right to academic freedom. Vice-Chancellor Hallberg has demanded that they be loyal, that is not to criticise decisions taken by the management regarding directions of research. Astonishingly he has obtained support for this deeply anti-intellectual stance from a large number of persons in leading positions at the university.

The issue has received widespread international attention and many prominent mathematicians around the world have expressed their dismay regarding the case. One of Sweden's foremost mathematicians, Lennart Carleson, has called the case the biggest academic scandal in modern times in Sweden.

What this shows is that the Vice-Chancellor of Uppsala University does not respect or understand the principle of academic freedom, but in case of conflicts acts according to patterns that are common in commercial organisations where he has a large part of his professional experience.

The other case concerns the Professor of Sociology Eva Lundgren. After she in May 2005 had stated on Swedish TV that hundreds of children in Sweden had been ritually murdered in sex orgies, the University decided to initiate an review of her research to see whether there were falsifications that could lead to a report to the Swedish Research Council. This investigation resulted in extensive criticism and of course no evidence could be found for the statements about child-murder. Eva Lundgren had for instance asserted that she had evidence that almost half (47 percent) of the women in Sweden had been subjected to violence from their male partners and that there is no difference between the men that

commit violence against their female partners and those that do not. The investigation showed that this was completely unfounded.

The figures for how many women had been subjected to violence had been exaggerated between five and ten times by Lundgren. It also showed that her main thesis, that there is no difference between the men that commit violence and those that do not, has no support at all. It was worse: the investigators' analysis of Lundgren's own data showed that "the conclusion should be the opposite. The risk that certain groups of men subject their wives to violence is significantly higher". Lundgren's own data showed that the risk to be subjected to violence was clearly higher for women whose partner is out of work, not born in Sweden or is a drug addict, but this was not accounted for.

The reaction of Uppsala University has not only been to clear Eva Lundgren of the charges and refuse the Swedish Research Council to review her research. The management has expressed their "complete confidence" in her and moreover given her outstandingly good working conditions! The reason is very likely that the theories of Lundgren has turned out to have large political support and often been used by leading politicians as arguments.

As these two cases clearly show, those in charge of Uppsala University no longer respect the fundamental principles that are required for a knowledge producing organisation to call itself a university. Instead one has chosen to adopt the principles that are valid in commercial or political organisations where the management decides what is true and right and where employees are expected to be loyal and obedient to the decrees of the authorities.

A possibility would of course be that Uppsala University is degraded to a college. However I think this would be mean to the many colleges that really strive run their business according the principles of a university. A more suitable possibility would be to call the activity The State Institute for Regulated Knowledge-production in Uppsala (SIRKUS). Since the activity is now governed by principles of obedience and loyalty towards the management that characterises private companies, the Vice-Chancellor could be named Chief Executive Officer, the professors be called Managing Directors and the PhD students reasonably be called Trainees.

The legacy and the ethics that was built up since 1477 when the university was founded has been misappropriated. If Anders Flodström is going to decrease the number of universities in the country, he may very well start with Uppsala.

Bo Rothstein

Translation by Anonymous