

Administration in higher education

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AUTHOR PRESENTATION IN ENGLISH PLEASE

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All organizations need administration to function properly. Employees working with the core tasks of a firm or government agency need administrative assistance to ensure that schedules are correct, supplies are delivered, and wages are paid out in good order. In public agencies, additional administration is needed to ensure compliance with rules and regulations and that documents are available in a transparent manner. A well-functioning administration may thus improve the productivity of the organization.

However, a substantial body of literature has found that administration often tends to become larger than what is optimal for organizations.¹ There are several reasons why such an unnecessary expansion of administration might occur. For example, administrative managers might want a larger organization as this gives them more influence. Difficulties in terms of measuring the output of administrative tasks could make it difficult for upper management to know how much resources to allocate. Recent ambitions to increase the efficiency of the public sector, often referred to as New Public Management, may also backfire in terms of the need to increase administration to measure the output of other employees. An increase in administrative staffing could have negative effects if this diverts funds from the core objective of the organization, especially in the public sector where additional funds may be difficult to obtain.

In order to study whether increasing administration could be a problem in the Swedish public sector, this analysis focuses on personnel working in higher education during the period 2004–2018. Higher education is an ideal object to study, since there are relatively few professions involved in the core tasks of teaching and research com-

pared to, for instance, healthcare. Second, Swedish higher education is exclusively regulated and funded by the national government, thus avoiding difficulties related to different organizational levels.

Using detailed data on the most common professions on a year-by-year basis, it is clear that some professions related to specialized administrative staff have increased significantly. This growth is not equally distributed but concentrated to a few professions mainly related to human resources, communications, and IT. However, it is difficult to identify exactly which mechanism is behind this increase. In addition to traditional theories of increasing administration, there have been additional legislation and calls for the Swedish higher education sector to coordinate with the rest of society, which could increase the need for communications officers. The higher education sector has also been tasked with increasing the number of students with a non-academic background, while also ensuring that education incorporates gender and sustainability perspectives as well as promoting internationalization. Such tasks necessarily require more staffing and could explain some of this increase.

This growth does not seem to reduce the time that researchers and teachers spend on administrative tasks themselves, which calls the efficiency of this increase in specialized administrators into question. If this trend continues, it could have negative effects on Swedish higher education diverting resources from the main objectives of teaching and research. Hence, it is crucial to ensure that this increase does not continue.

1. Niskanen 1968; 1975.

References

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