



SCIENTIFIC FINAL REPORT

Östersjöstiftelsen: 73/2015

Project manager: Jenny Magnusson

Project title: Independence in higher education: A comparative study of Sweden and Russia.

1. Purpose of the project

The project had a three-folded purpose directed at producing new knowledge, theoretical development and pedagogical development.

Firstly, the aim of the project was to explore how the concept of independence within higher education was understood and used on different levels, in different education programs (teacher and journalism education), as well as in different countries (Russia and Sweden). More specifically, the project examined how independence was constructed, enabled and enacted in the practice of writing degree projects, in local steering documents, in supervision interaction and by investigating supervisors' understandings of independence.

Secondly, the project aimed to develop the theoretical framework regarding the concept of independence in the supervision context, through combining theoretical perspectives and concepts from academic literacy, institutional linguistics, and research in higher education.

Thirdly, the project aimed to contribute to pedagogical development within higher education by systematizing experience-based knowledge and providing a meta-language to discuss and lift observations from the supervision practice.

2. The three most important results of the project and what conclusions can be drawn from them

In accordance with the three-folded purpose of the project, we will here present the main results related to the knowledge production around independence in higher education and to the development of the theoretical framework concerning independence in supervision of degree projects and the main results contributing to the pedagogical development within higher education.

a) The relative nature of the concept of independence

The main results from the exploration of how the concept of independence was understood and used within higher education showed, as could be expected, that there was a great variation between different levels and academic contexts. One assumption before the analysis of the material was that the greatest variation would be between universities in the two countries, Russia and Sweden, due to the often seen differences in values and attitudes



between these two countries (see more below). This was, however, not primarily the case. The variations that became visible in the analysis of the focus group material and documented supervision interaction, did exist between universities in the two countries but also between universities in the same country, between education programmes or local academic contexts within the same university or between individual supervisors within the same academic department. Likewise, the similarities in the understandings of independence in relation to the supervision of degree projects, which were also evident in the analysed material, existed both on an individual, local and national level, and thus also between supervisors from Russia and Sweden.

Our results thus emphasize the relative nature of the concept of independence within higher education, and we identified several patterns related to this, concerning for instance how independence may be understood as both thinking or doing, and as both a process and product which may be manifested at various stages of the supervision process. The main differences thus appeared to be found between mind, text, talking and doing, as well as between process and product. The variations identified, indicate that independence, like many other key concepts within higher education practice, is a complex and multifaceted concept, with many different understandings or meanings. In order to use it constructively, it needs to be specified – whether the aim is to increase comparability between higher education in different countries, in accordance with the Bologna declaration, or to find a common ground for assessing degree projects at a particular university or education programme.

The ways in which central academic concepts are understood and conceptualised in universities and academic contexts are likely to have a major bearing on the shaping of university curricula and of higher education policy as a whole. The different ways of understanding the concept of independence, which we have identified in the project, may thus have consequences for both the academic practice and the assessment of students. Considering how supervisors, or tutors, have been pointed out as vital for enabling and encouraging independent learning, a conclusion drawn from this is the necessity of anchoring the discussion of the concept of independence as well as of other central concepts within higher education, in an empirical material that takes into account the views and experiences of the practitioners, as we have done in this project.

b) Independence in relation to academic literacies and scaffolding

The results concerning how independence should be seen as a relative concept, lay the foundation for the results related to theoretical development. Starting from the different understandings of independence which we had identified in the focus group material from supervisors in Russia and Sweden, we examined how specific aspects of independence were visible in the interaction between supervisor and student, in other words in the supervision practice, and how this could be understood in relation to the theoretical framework of academic literacies.

To do this, we started from the concept of scaffolding, a theoretical concept widely used within education research and highly relevant in relation to supervision of degree projects and discussed this in relation to the wider framework of academic literacies. The main



results showed for instance how student independence may be regarded as a scaffolding objective and how for instance emotions, questions or voicing could be potential scaffolding tools in the supervision context. This was discussed in relation to the academic literacies concept *code switching*, which refers to students' abilities to adapt to and understand different epistemological understandings and expectations in various local academic contexts. One conclusion drawn from this was that scaffolding tools as the ones mentioned above could contribute to preparing students for the code switching an academic education necessarily entails.

Another main result concerned development of the theories on supervision as an individualistic or collective practice, for instance in that the analysis of the recorded supervision meetings showed how the supervision process and the meetings between individual students and supervisors are saturated with references to other actors within the supervision context, such as course organizers, examiners, seminar leaders, other students etcetera. A conclusion drawn from this was the need for meta language and collegial discussions around the concepts and practices connected to the supervision of degree projects, in order to get more consistent views and actions between the various actors involved.

c) Tools for collegial and collective learning

Supervision in higher education has traditionally been associated with an implicit individualistic learning culture: a dyadic pedagogical relation between two people, where one is teaching and one is learning. This more traditional view has, however, become increasingly questioned, and greater focus has been put on collegial structures and collective learning within the academic community, viewing the practice of the individual supervisor as continuously existing and developing in social interaction with others.

A conclusion drawn from this is that due to this implicit individualistic learning practice, there is a need for tools to make the practice visible, concepts with which one can describe and discuss the supervision practice. In the project we have identified several such tools to use in order to make the supervision practice explicit, concepts concerning;

- Different understandings of independence, and in which phases of the degree project they were seen as most significant.
- Different forms of praise used in supervision interaction, and how praise functions in different contexts.
- Different forms of questions, used by the supervisor to enable independence in supervision interaction.
- Different forms of emotions and how these are handled in different ways in the supervision interactions.

3. The project's contribution to the international research frontline

The project has contributed to the international research frontline through its focus on independence within higher education, a concept that is highly significant within higher education internationally, but which is rarely defined and discussed in relation to views and



practices. The project's multidisciplinary character, where perspectives, theories and analytical tools from linguistics, journalism, ethnology and higher education research have been combined, has enabled examining student independence in relation to supervision from several angles, thus giving a fuller picture of this complex concept.

The project has also contributed to the international research through its use of a wide range of material: focus group interviews with supervisors at different universities in Sweden and Russia, steering documents from the two countries, recorded supervision meetings and documentation of the supervision process through collection of e-mail conversations between student and supervisor and text drafts. This has enabled a heightened focus on supervision *practice*, a perspective in need of further investigation, as well as the formulation of potential pedagogical tools for supervisors which can enable or encourage student independence and the development of academic literacies.

Through this approach, the project thus complements and adds to existing research through presenting a more nuanced and complex view of how independence may be understood within higher education and, in particular, within the supervision context, as well as through using research results to develop pedagogical higher education tools.

4. New research questions that the project has led to

In our project we explored preconditions for internationalization, through the different understandings of central academic concepts. In a newly designed project we plan to explore what these kind of preconditions means in practice, internationalization in the context of the academic workplace. Here we have chosen international doctoral students visiting Sweden and we want to know more about what kind of internationalization is realized in meetings of different kinds in the workplace.

In our project we have explored academic differences between universities and countries when it comes to humanities and civic/social sciences. In an extension of our project we would like to explore natural sciences from the same perspective as well, where differences and variations may be even bigger.

5. The contribution of the research to the knowledge of the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe

The research done within the project has contributed to to the knowledge of the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe through its inclusion of empirical material from both Russia and Sweden, which has enabled comparisons between higher education and supervision ideals and practices in the two countries, for instance through examining similarities and differences in comparable courses at universities in Russia and Sweden. This comparison indicates similarities and differences between different local academic contexts in the two countries, here in particular concerning academic writing and the relationship to the supervisor, and thus the variations in expectations students may encounter when going between them.



The results exemplify how existing differences in degree project courses in Sweden and Russia, both on an organizational level and in how supervisors view and understand their own and the students' roles and responsibilities, determine what students would have to understand and manage when adapting to a new academic environment if moving between academic contexts in these two countries at this level of their education. The research done thus contributes to knowledge on how circumstances and requirements on a micro-level may be of relevance for the conditions for international student mobility within higher education in the Baltic Sea Region, in this case Sweden and Russia in particular.

Another contribution of the project to the knowledge of the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe, comes from the examination of supervisors' understandings of independence. Based on the differences between Russia and Sweden in values and attitudes concerning views on authorities and the individual/collective aspects, which are visible for instance in the World Value Survey and other similar international comparisons of values and attitudes, one would have expected rather prominent differences in the supervisors' understandings of and views on independence in relation to supervision of degree projects. Our results, however, showed many fundamental similarities, and rather few such differences.

6. Dissemination of the results of the project within and outside the research community

Results from the project have been disseminated within the research community through a number of articles in national and international scientific journals and papers at national and international conferences within higher education, journalism, ethnology and Swedish/linguistics. One important event here was an international two-day symposium: *Undergraduate supervision – National and International Perspectives*, arranged by the project in 2018, which included participants from Södertörn University, Malmö University, Nordic Arctic Federal University Archangelsk, Herzen State Pedagogical University St Petersburg, Moscow State University, St Petersburg State University, Stockholm University, Mälardalen University and Finland. Here results from the project were presented and discussed with a particular focus on comparison between Sweden, Russia and Finland.

Since one of the aims of the project was to contribute to pedagogical development within higher education, the participating researchers have worked actively with presenting and discussing results in such settings. This has resulted in several invitations from academic departments and programs at various Swedish universities to organize or give presentations at pedagogical workshops, education days or seminars directed at supervision of degree projects, as well as papers at the NU2018 and NU2020 conferences, which were directed at the development of higher education.

A significant part in reaching a wider audience outside the research community is, furthermore, the higher education textbook monograph on supervision of degree projects, which two of the project researchers authored together and published at Studentlitteratur.



The book was presented at *Bok- och biblioteksmässan* in Göteborg in 2021 and is used in higher education pedagogical courses at several Swedish universities. Also, we have presented results from the project in schools and for employees in the municipality.

List of publications from the project

Textbook/monograph:

Magnusson, J & Zackariasson, M (2021) *Handledning i praktiken: Om studenters självständighet och akademiska litteracitet*, Studentlitteratur, Lund

Articles

Magnusson, J & Zackariasson, M (submitted) Supervision of degree projects in teacher education: a collective practice?

Magnusson, J. (2021). Handledarens frågor: Att möjliggöra självständighet i ett handledningssamtal. *Högre Utbildning*, 11(1), 56-75. <https://doi.org/10.23865/hu.v11.2296>. Open access: <https://hogreutbildning.se/index.php/hu/article/view/2296/5290>.

Magnusson, J. (2021). Positioning oneself in relation to sources and context – Enactments of independence in undergraduate supervision. *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Professional Practice*, 14(3), 351–373. <https://doi.org/10.1558/jalpp.19879>.

Zackariasson, M. (2020) Kun kaikki ei menekään niin kuin piti. Syyllisyyden tunne ja häpeä tutkielmaohjauksessa (När det inte blir som man tänkt sig. Skuldmedvetenhet och skam i uppsatshandledning.). I: *Afektit ja tunteet kulttuurin tutkimuksessa* (Affects and emotions in cultural research). Red. Jenni Rinne, Anna Kajander & Riina Haanpää. Helsingfors: Ethnos-toimite, s. 275-309. Open access: <https://helda.helsinki.fi/handle/10138/315039>

Zackariasson, M. & Magnusson, J. (2020) Academic literacies and international mobility. The organization and supervision of degree projects in Sweden and Russia, *Cogent Education*, 7:1. Open access: DOI: [10.1080/2331186X.2020.1855770](https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2020.1855770).

Magnusson, J. (2020) Oenighet i handledningssamtal: att säga emot sin handledare, *Språk & stil NF* 30, 175-204. Open access: <https://www.nordiska.uu.se/sos/register/2020/>.

Zackariasson, M. (2020) Kris i högre utbildning? Skrivande, breddad rekrytering och förmågan att navigera mellan olika epistemologiska fält. *Kulturella perspektiv* 29(1-2), 39-45. Open access: <http://sh.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A1412851&dswid=-2219>

Magnusson, J. (2020) ”Jättebra, men” - Handledares beröm i handledningssamtal, *Språk och interaktion*, 5:3. S. 45-68. Open access: <https://helda.helsinki.fi/bitstream/handle/10138/318151/Språk%20och%20interaktion%205.3.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

Zackariasson, M. (2019) Balansen mellan att uppmuntra och ställa krav. En reflektion över studenters uppsatsskrivande i relation till stress och stöttning. *Högre Utbildning*. 9(2), 15-24. Open access: DOI: <https://doi.org/10.23865/hu.v9.1662>



Zackariasson, M. (2019) Encouraging student independence – perspectives on scaffolding in higher education supervision. *JAHRE Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education* 12 (3), 495-505. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1108/JARHE-01-2019-0012>. Open access: <http://sh.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A1352538&dswid=-9850>

Zackariasson, M. (2018) 'I feel really good now!' – Emotions and independence in undergraduate supervision. *LATISS Learning and Teaching: The International Journal of Higher Education in the Social Sciences*. 11(3), 1-24. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3167/latiss.2018.110303>. Open access. <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A1301663&dswid=7411>

Magnusson, J. & Zackariasson, M. (2018). Student independence in undergraduate projects: Different understandings in different academic contexts. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*: 1–16. Open access: DOI: [10.1080/0309877X.2018.1490949](https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2018.1490949)

Goldenzwaig, G. (2018) "Самостоятельность студента в создании ВКР: опыт журналистского образования в России и Швеции" "A Student's Independence in Writing a Graduation Thesis: the Experience of Journalistic Education in Russia and Sweden". Vestnik MGU: Zhurnalistika. Open access: <http://vestnik.journ.msu.ru/upload/iblock/02e/vest-06-17.pdf>

Selection of 5 most important conferences organized and papers presented

Papers presented at the conference *Forskning om högre utbildning*, Örebro universitet, Örebro, May 19-20, 2021. "Osäkra studenter - och handledare? Att hantera osäkerhet i uppsatshandledning" Maria Zackariasson and "Handledarens frågor: att möjliggöra självständighet i ett handledningssamtal, Jenny Magnusson".

Project symposium: *Undergraduate supervision - National and International Perspectives*, September 27-28, 2018, Södertörn University. Presenters from Södertörn University, Malmö University, Nordic Arctic Federal University Archangelsk, Herzen State Pedagogical University St Petersburg, Moscow State University, St Petersburg State University, Stockholm University, Mälardalen University and Finland.

Paper presented at *NERA 2018 Boundaries, Breaches and Bridges*, Oslo, March 8-10, 2018. Title: "‘They shouldn't work all by themselves’ Supervisors' understandings of student independence in undergraduate projects". Maria Zackariasson & Jenny Magnusson. Link: <http://www.nera2018.uio.no/>

Paper at the *9th International Media Readings in Moscow "Mass Media & Communications 2017"*, Moscow State University, Moskva, October 20, 2017. Title: "How Independent are Journalism Students in the Course of Their Individual Work? Representations of Independence in Two Academic Contexts". Greg Goldenzweig & Jan-Olof Gullö.

Paper at *ECER 2016 Leading Education: The Distinct Contributions of Educational Research and Researchers*. University College Dublin, Dublin. August 22-26, 2016. Title: "Independence: Different Understandings and Meanings in Steering Documents in Higher Education in Sweden and Russia." Jan-Olof Gullö, Jenny Magnusson, Greg Goldenzweig. Link: <https://www.eera-ecer.de/previous-ecers/ecer-2016-dublin/>