Closing the Swedish National Institute for Working Life

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A review of the possible consequences of this radical decision

In October 2006 the new Swedish government announced, in its budgetary proposal for the fiscal year of 2007, its intention to close the Swedish National Institute for Working Life (NIWL). This action was taken within a short time of assuming office, and set a closing date of 30 June 2007. At a stroke the measures will eliminate several research establishments of the NIWL in Stockholm, Umeå, Östersund, Norrköping, Göteborg, Malmö and Visby with a staff of roughly 400 researchers, auxiliary staff and management/administration, and an annual state budget of €40 million, as well as research grants of about €6–8 million from diverse funding agencies.

The decision sent a shockwave through the international occupational health research community. The Swedish NIWL has a long-standing track record of producing high quality and highly relevant research. No coherent explanation has been offered for this drastic State intervention. Researchers and practitioners of the international occupational health community have expressed surprise to the cabinet and parliamentary members involved. From all sides feelings of sympathy and commiseration have been shown over the plight of our Swedish colleagues. Forced to accept as a fact this truly deplorable turn of events, we are, however, well advised to ponder its implications.

A FEW HISTORICAL NOTES

The NIWL was originally set up in the early 1960s as an institute for applied research, primarily addressing research and development (R&D) needs in working populations under the name of the National Institute of Occupational Medicine, directly subordinated to the Ministry of Labour. It was not part of the university system of Sweden. In 1972 it was incorporated into the National Board of Occupational Safety and Health, and in 1987 it was repackaged as the independent National Institute of Occupational Health. In 1996, in a major reshuffle and merger of Occupational Health and

Working Life research organisations, the NIWL was set up. During the next few years NIWL regional branches were set up, spreading resources from Stockholm. Through these operations the NIWL emerged with a significantly broadened range of research competencies. There was, however, a price to pay for this new profile. The strengthening of sociology and behavioural sciences was managed by reducing the medical disciplines and staff with a background in natural sciences. So, the competence profile of the NIWL came to be broader than its predecessor and at the same time thinner, because all was to be achieved within a pre-set budgetary frame. One emergent implication was the slimming of some research units to a size critically near or even below the "critical mass" necessary for the makings of an effective and creative research organisation. To compensate for this, many research units chose to strengthen collaboration with university departments. In this stage of transformation the political decision to close the institute was taken.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE CLOSURE

The radical step of closing the NIWL has, it appears, been taken with no analysis of consequences. The immediate consequences affected 40+ graduate students preparing their doctoral theses, the vocational training programmes of occupational health professionals, the international commitments on R&D projects in collaboration with research institutions in other countries, and the Working Life library of the institute as a technically developed national resource of excellence accessible by researchers, professionals and the general public. The closure affected a broad range of ongoing projects, most of which could not be brought to their conclusion before the closing date. The loss of data research material and experience collected in ongoing research programmes is significant, the implication being a substantial loss on investment. The group of 40+ graduate students could, fortunately, be

salvaged, due to fast and constructive thinking and steps taken in the upper echelons of ministries, universities and civil service departments, implicated. This group was also identified early as a special case on legal grounds.

The overriding consequences, however, are the loss of highly qualified and competent research personnel. A crude assessment indicates a 20–25% contraction in Sweden's research capacity in the fields of occupational health and life quality at work.

THE OSTENSIBLE REASONS FOR CLOSING THE NIWL

In its defence, the government has cited a need to strengthen university-based research structures, but only in vague and general terms. No indication has been given of how a crippled occupational health research infrastructure might be accommodated within the university setting.

Has this been a matter of quality then? Seemingly, the quality of NIWL research and scientific development programmes (R&D) and related publishing has not been an issue before, or been proposed as a motive now. The previous government initiated an evaluation of the quality and relevance of the NIWL R&D programmes, commissioning the National Agency for Organizational Development for this task. One of the first steps taken by the new government after electoral victory was a withdrawal of this commission.

What has now happened is clearly something to be made transparent and explained primarily to the public in Sweden. For the international community, the important question arising is "What can we learn from this?"

WHAT IS THE LESSON TO LEARN?

To us, research in occupational health and development is an important strategy for the improvement of working lives and safety and health worldwide. Research institutes have an onus to deliver high quality research that can be communicated and shared on both national and international levels to improve the knowledge base. To achieve this, research organisations need to provide creative settings of a critical size capable of sustained development in the long term. A second, equally important requirement is the relevance of research to the subject at-issue: occupational health. Research programmes have to address those conditions at work, in the working environment and in the organisation of work which raise safety and health concerns and work-related ill health. This requirement needs to be assessed by stakeholder groups, as well as governments and the

research community. The third requirement is effective communication between R&D institutions and the stakeholders, consumers and practitioners in the field making use of R&D achievements. In most countries this is seen as a task of applied research institutions, irrespective of whether they operate within universities or outside of them. This is basically a matter of communication and the building up of trust between the research community and its partners in society and labour markets.

Seen in this light, institutions and organisations of applied research are dependent on the trust of those who assess and make use of their achievements. The existence of applied research institutions depends on their ability to satisfy needs and expectations of important stakeholder groups—public or private. In most countries this feature

distinguishes them from state university institutions enjoying academic freedom. When looking for explanations in the demise of the NIWL we may be seeing a case where communication between the institute involved and its stakeholders has not been optimal. One possibly significant observation is the absence of comprehensive and independent evaluations in the past. The evaluation initiated by the previous government came late and was not fulfilled.

Many of us have held Sweden, in the same way as the other Nordic countries of Europe, as a role model for taking occupational health and safety matters seriously. The closing of the NIWL, without prior analysis of the implications and with no visible intention to manage the consequences is now regarded as a gross lack of governance. To put it plainly, it is at this present time understood as a

conspicuous step away from being a role model. We have certainly been given reason to reflect on what has happened. We may also have learned something. Ignoring the demands of both evaluation and important stakeholders' expectations is adventurous for applied research institutions—it may lead to vulnerability to political whims with unpredictable effects. The demise of the Swedish National Institute for Working Life has given us food for thought.

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