Selling out Education in the Name of Digitalization: A Critical Analysis of Swedish Policy

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ABSTRACT
Sweden aspires to become ‘the best in the world at utilizing the opportunities of digitalization’ and is internationally recognized for its digital performance. Education has been identified as instrumental for the digital transformation of Swedish society, and efforts are made to accelerate the digitalization of the educational system. As governments’ demands for digitalization get increasingly loud and persuasive, it is important to critically explore what values and ideologies are embedded in the argumentation. In this study, we use Critical Discourse Analysis to examine the Swedish Digitalization Commission’s report ‘For digitalization with the times’. Our results demonstrate that the policy argumentation, despite being anchored in traditional Swedish welfare values, is characterized by a coherent and reductionist neoliberal framing of education. Students are represented as self-managing entrepreneurial citizens with a moral obligation to renew their human capital and adapt to market demands, while the educational system is constructed as a flexible, largely automated, infrastructure for ‘life-long learning’, in which teaching is reduced to ‘facilitating’. We suggest that such discourses around education in Swedish policy rest upon three preconditions: digitalization as an interconnective policy object, Swedish digitalization policy making as soft governance, and the Swedish welfare model as susceptible to discursive drift.

Introduction
The digital transformation is a major concern for governments all over the world. Large efforts are made in order to adapt to the realities of an increasingly digital society and economy but also to use the new technologies for national and regional growth. Policy on multiple levels identify digitalization as an enabler for change and innovation with regards to contemporary global challenges such as globalization, the climate crisis, sustainability, health and a shifting labour market, but also as key for national positioning in an uncertain and competitive world.

Education is expected to play a leading role in the digitalization of society, but also to embrace new technologies and utilize their potential (ITU, UNESCO and UNICEF, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2015). According to the European Commission’s Digital Education Action Plan, for example, the digitalization of education will enrich learning, empower learners, improve learning outcomes, reduce the learning gap, increase motivation, and – through the exploitation of big data – tailor content to individual students’ needs. Through technology, educational institutions are expected to adjust to and contribute to societal changes framed as the digital economy, increased individualization, life-long learning opportunities, and data-driven innovation, to name just a few (European Commission, 2018).

In supranational, national and institutional policy, we find a strong consensus on the importance and urgency of the digitalization of education, and over the past decade we have observed a growing activity on many levels to promote the digital transformation of education. Regulations, policies, projects and digital infrastructures are being developed through complex educational governance, encompassing the supranational-national, political-academic, and public-private, where governments and elected politicians are conjoined with experts, leaders of educational institutions, philanthropists and leaders of tech-companies in shaping the future of education.

Many authors have described and problematized this form of complex educational governance in relation to, for example, the Bologna process and the privatization of education (Ball, 2009; Brooks, 2021; Moschetti et al., 2020; Verger et al., 2017). Brogger describes how a network-based, soft governance has facilitated the governing and transformation of European education without ‘the use of government’ (Brøgger, 2018, p. 355). Ball and Youdell describe a privatization of the process of policy making itself.
(2008), through a growing influence of private actors in the governance of education that challenge public sector representatives, lawmakers, and ultimately parliamentary democracy in the shaping of education. Policy on digitalization of education, therefore, could be expected to represent complex amalgamates of world views, concerns and expectations of the many and diverse actors, not least private, involved in their construction. Furthermore, the amorphicity of digitalization as a concept makes it possible for such actors to construct different interpretations on what it entails and how it could lead to desired outcomes, and facilitates the obscuring of values, objectives and agendas. This highlights the need to identify explicit and implicit ideologies embedded in the premises and claims being put forward in policy on digitalization of education. Such policy is particularly interesting to study in national contexts where governance has a strong tradition of public sector influence, such as in the many European welfare states (Cone & Brogger, 2020) where national regulation of and authority over education is strong. Sweden, where this study is set, is well known for its history as a social-democratic welfare state in which education is a key component, but has nevertheless adopted market-oriented policies (Svallfors & Tyllström, 2019; Wiborg, 2013) and been an early adopter of ideas associated with various European, international and transnational educational processes and projects (Lundahl, 2007).

The present study is the first part of a larger research project addressing governance in relation to the digitalization of education in Sweden. In this study we use Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2010) to critically analyse the sections related to digitalization of education in the Swedish Digitalization Commission’s report ‘För digitalisering i tiden’ (Digitaliseringskommissionen, 2016) in order to identify and examine embedded ideologies. Our analysis is guided by the following questions:

- How is reality framed in political arguments surrounding the digitalization of education?
- What discursive strategies are used to legitimize the digitalization of education?
- How are students, teachers and institutions, as well as teaching and learning, represented?

Such analysis is certainly made more relevant by the current COVID-19 pandemic and the dramatic digital transformation of education following in the wake of its spread, virtually a global baptism of fire for educational providers, teachers and students alike. Combined with the likely long-lasting economic and social impact of the pandemic and national as well as European relief strategies that include digitalization measures, it is likely to throw the gates wide open for a widespread digitalization of education. The discourses associated with digitalization in educational policy work will then through ‘necessarian logic’ (Ball, 2016, p. 1048) to a large extent define the future of education, which further emphasizes the need to scrutinize the implications embedded in such discourses.

Critical Research on Digitalization of Education

Of particular interest for our study is previous research centring on the different parts of what we would characterize as a threefold relationship between digitalization, education and governance, specifically the ways in which this relationship is ideologically underpinned. In that respect, much of Neil Selwyn’s work (2011, 2013, 2015a, 2015b, 2018) is of relevance for this paper. He has written extensively about different problematic aspects of educational technology such as the influence of IT industry on policy-making and the ways in which marketing discourses underpin conversations about what education is and should be. Furthermore, within the field of policy studies Ball (1993, 1998, 2009, 2012, 2015, 2016) has explored the relationship between educational governance and privatization and demonstrated the deep embedding of private actors within the networks involved in educational policy work, out of which new forms of public-private partnerships emerge.

Much critical research has focused on how educational technologies – or specific aspects of digitalization – are ideologically framed in national educational policy texts. In the UK context, notable contributions to the field are Munro’s critical analyses of national and local digital teaching and learning strategies and policy papers (Munroa 2017, 2018), through which she demonstrates a neoliberal framing of educational technology in e-learning policies. Matthews (2020) discourse analysis of local teaching excellence statements and strategies of UK universities shows that educational technologies are being constructed as neutral and apolitical and to be used as means to a specific end or as an end in themselves. In the US, Roberts-Mahoney et al.’s (2016) explore how narratives around personalized learning and big data in Department of Education reports and white papers contribute to a construction of ‘learning’ as an efficient and quantifiable process of behavioural modification and skills acquisition, which facilitates a reorientation of decision-making from schools and teachers to private corporations. In the context of the Nordic countries, Nivala (2009) analyses premises and conclusions for action in Finnish ICT and education strategies from 1999 to 2004 and unveils a deterministic discourse in which ICT is constructed as a motor for change and innovation. Saari and Säntti (2018), through an analysis of Finnish education policy, uncover rhetorical strategies that emphasize the
nation’s urgent need to strengthen its economic competitiveness and to update its educational system (despite Finland’s reputation as one of the best educational systems in the world), and discuss how such strategies can be used in combination to convince school leaders and teachers of the virtues of digitalization. Hanell (2018) exposes how problems underlying policy makers’ arguments for ‘digital competence’ in Swedish teacher education are represented through an economic discourse, and Ideland et al. (2021) demonstrate how a crisis narrative is used in policy and media discourses to nurture the intervention of EdTech companies in Swedish schools.

An important question to ask, however, is how such discourses fit into the common rhetoric of education as a public good, still a pervasive ideal in much educational policy (although its exact definition has changed over time, as Williams, 2016 demonstrates with reference to the UK). This points to a need for critical studies scrutinizing the legitimization of digitalization in policy texts against the background of a potential conflict between welfare state ideals and the influence of private interests on policy work, such as the one presented in this paper.

Digitalization and the Case of Sweden

The focus on Swedish policy is relevant for several reasons. Firstly, digitalization (or computerization) and the use of information technologies has been a key political concern in Sweden since the 50s, underpinned by a strong political and economic rationale and actualized through various governmental initiatives aiming to adapt citizens to a digital society (Rahm, 2019). Sweden is today recognized as a leader in the digital transformation of society and the economy in international comparison. In the European Commission Digital Economy and Society Index, Sweden is currently ranked second (European Commission,). This position is in line with the Swedish government’s ambitions: already in 2000, the objective was set to ‘be the first country to become an information society for everyone’ (Näringsdepartementet, 2000), later changed to ‘be the best in the world at utilizing the opportunities of digitalization’ (Näringsdepartementet, 2011). Secondly, as a member of the European union, Sweden aligns and develops its national policies in relation to the supranational within the European policy field of education, as well as takes an active part in the crafting of European policy. Our results should therefore also be relevant in the context of other member countries as well as for studies at the European level. Finally, despite the fact that the Swedish public sector – similar to many other European welfare states – has undergone a substantive ideological shift and a range of neoliberal reforms from the 80s and onwards (Lapidus, 2015), the idea of the ‘Scandinavian model’ is still an important point of identification for Swedish policy makers and the Swedish public alike. In combination with an especially strong reliance on consensual policy formulation, through the work of appointed government commissions with the power to both define problems and propose solutions to them (Bergh & Erlingssson, 2009), this makes Swedish policy a particularly interesting object of study when exploring the relationship between policy discourse and ideology.

Method

Empirical Data

The data analysed in this study consists of text passages from the government report ‘För digitaliserings i tiden’, published by The Swedish Digitalization Commission in 2016 (Digitaliseringskommissionen, 2016). The task of the Swedish Digitalization Commission, which was appointed by the government in May 2012, was to promote digitalization and work towards the national objective ‘to be the best in the world at utilizing the opportunities of digitalization’ (Näringsdepartementet, 2011). The mission for the commission was to identify strategic areas that should be considered in a digitalization policy; to investigate the need for promotion at the national level; to follow up the work of the regional digital agendas; to publish reports about the effects of digitalization on individuals and society; and to support the Government’s efforts in promoting digitalization issues (Digitaliseringskommissionen, 2016, p. 31). The commission’s work ended in 2016 (at which point it was replaced by a national digitalization council). Its final report summarizes the commission’s understanding of the effects of digitalization and includes recommendations for prioritized areas. It covers six themes, of which ‘Education and lifelong learning in the digital era’ is one.³

While published more than four years ago, this government report is still the most recent national policy text relevant for the digitalization of all levels in the Swedish education system. It is representative of a long history of policy work within the field of digitalization, and it is particularly important for understanding Sweden’s current and future approach to digitalization, as its arguments, conclusions and recommendations have formed the basis for, and been reproduced by, a number of educationally related national and local strategies, action plans and vision statements. These include the current national digitalization strategy (Näringsdepartementet, 2017); the national digital strategy for the school system (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2017); the digital action plan for the school system (Sveriges Kommuner och
Table 1.

| Chapter | Subchapter | Section(s) | Test passage |
|---------|------------|------------|--------------|
| 3. Knowledge compilation about the effects of digitalization on the individual and the society, pp. 75–130 | 3.4. Education and lifelong learning in a digital age, pp. 104–115 | 3.4.1. A changing labour market | p. 104 (extract 1) |
| | | 3.4.4. The role of higher education in a digital age | p. 112 (extract 2) |
| 4. Assessments and conclusions, pp. 131–148 | 4.4. Needs identified through the 2016 knowledge compilation, pp. 140-148 | 4.4.5. A national strategy for the digitalization of higher education is needed | p. 144 (extract 4) |
| 5. Recommendations, pp. 149–160 | 5.5. Competence for digitalization – prioritize building skills to ensure welfare and growth in the digital society, pp. 159–160 | Education and lifelong learning, pp. 171–175 | pp. 159–160 (extract 5 and 6) |
| Scenario: Sweden 2030 – An integrated, smart and competitive digital society, pp. 161–196 | |

Landsting, 2019), and local university policies (KTH Royal Institute of Technology University Board; Mid Sweden University University Board). Further, the Swedish Higher Education Authority (Universitetskanslerämbetet, 2019), referring to the national digitalization objective, recently called for a national strategy for digitalization in higher education, the need for which is explicitly expressed in the report. Identical or similar arguments to the ones put forward in the examined report can be found in all these documents. Naturally, the question of causality between political discourse and actual social change cannot be addressed solely by studying a single policy text. What studies like this might be able to show, however, is how ideological power as manifested in political discourse may constrain agency by providing agents with reasons for actions that they might otherwise not have (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012, p. 102).

The report is written in Swedish, is 252 pages long and contains the following parts: the commission chairman’s preface, a table of contents, a summary (in Swedish and in English), a description of the commission’s work and its implementation; an assessment of Sweden’s fulfilment of the overarching IT objective (based on international indexes); a compilation of the commission’s accumulated understanding of the effect of digitalization on the individual and the society; assessment and conclusions; recommendations to the government for prioritized actions; a description of a future scenario; references and seven appendices. For the purposes of this analysis, we have identified subchapters of the report that contain larger sections discussing the digitalization of education, altogether 28 pages. From this material, text passages of particular interest for the research questions have been selected for closer analysis, amounting to around 10 pages. The sections in which these passages occur (where applicable), and the chapters and subchapters to which they belong, are listed in Table 1.4 Shorter extracts from these passages are quoted in the results section in order to illustrate the use of particular discursive strategies. In one case (extract 3), the passage is quoted in its full length.

Critical Discourse Analysis as an Approach to Policy Research

CDA is a particularly useful method for critically analysing policy as texts (Lester et al., 2017; Taylor, 1997) as it centres on the relationship between language and other social practices and – using a trans-disciplinary approach – attempts to answer questions about how language is involved in (re)constructing social life. It can be described as the systematic exploration of the relationship between discursive practices, events and texts on one side and wider social and cultural structures on the other, with a particular focus on the dialectical relationship between discourse and power, including ideologies. The critical discourse approach used in this study is leaning towards a structuralist approach (Anderson & Holloway, 2018) in the sense that we focus on how ideologies are reproduced in language and on what linguistic strategies and specific discourses are drawn upon for legitimizing actions.

In regard to political discourse, which is the focus of this study, following Fairclough & Fairclough, we view its ultimate purpose as ‘not to describe the world but to underpin decision and action’ (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012, p. 13). We therefore adopt an approach to CDA that pays attention to practical
argumentation, i.e. ‘the reasoning about what we should do’ (ibid, 87) as a primary activity of political discourse. More precisely, this involves critically examining how aspects of reality are represented and framed in premises (such as beliefs about goals, circumstances and values) and underlying arguments for action (claims). It also includes searching for the absence or presence of alternative options in the texts studied, and examining how such options, if present, are represented.

In this study, through a textual analysis focused on practical argumentation and deliberation, we identify discursive strategies for the legitimation and rationalization of digitalization in relation to education and explore how aspects of the social world are constructed and values and ideologies represented in the argumentation. The process was guided by a CDA approach to analysing political discourse influenced by argumentation theory and analysis (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012). We first identified a point of entry into the analysis of the Swedish digitalization policy which focused on identifying and examining semiotic strategies that realize (de)politicization, legitimation and ideology in relation to digitalization of education. We then posed critical questions to the texts to test the reasonableness of proposed actions. Such questions challenge the truth or rationality of the (explicit and implicit) premises and the circumstances and values they refer to (the ‘framing’ of the context for the action) as well as the rationality of the conclusions made on the basis of such premises in terms of how to act (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012, pp. 65–6). The questions referred to values underlying the framing of calls for action and potential negative consequences of such proposed actions in terms of, for example, achieving other important goals. This analytic process involved a close reading and re-reading of the policy text and in particular of the selected passages, followed by the critical questioning of textual representations forming premises or claims through a thorough examination of linguistic (for example, clause combinations, grammatical and semantic features and word choice) and inter-linguistical (for example, text organization and features of interdiscursivity – such as what genres, discourses and styles are drawn upon and how are they articulated together) aspects of the text passages.

Results

Through the analysis, we could identify five main strategies that shape the argumentation surrounding digitalization of education in the policy text. These strategies can be summarized as follows: constructing global change and national (digital) solutions; telling and selling the value of educational technology; legitimizing action through threats of a competitive market; arguing through neoliberal master narratives; and recontextualizing teaching and learning.

These strategies also guide the organization of the overall line of reasoning in the policy document. For that reason, in what follows, they are presented in the order that they are employed in the document, even though some of them are utilized more saliently than others and thus warrant more extensive discussion.

In what follows, for each of these strategies, we discuss the results of our analysis using extracts from the analysed text passages to illustrate our arguments. The context for each text extract is presented as a background for the analysis.

Constructing Global Change and National (Digital) Solutions

After having established that in a ‘in a constantly changing global labor market’ (p. 104) the individual needs to continuously acquire new skills and competencies, the authors of the report describe the characteristics of this job market in a section of ‘3.4. Education and lifelong learning in a digital age’ with the title ‘3.4.1. A changing labor market’.

Extract 1

Digitalization, automation and robotization are fundamentally changing the labor market and leading to the disappearance of many professions, while other professions are changing and new ones are being added/... /The development also shifts from people having permanent jobs to more and more people being self-employed and having temporary jobs. (Digitaliseringskommissionen, 2016, p. 104)

The first part of this section is written in the present tense and devoid of human agents, as exemplified by the extract above. This way of depoliticizing processes of change is representative of what Fairclough (2010, pp. 285–6) calls ‘global spacetime’. By constructing social structures as inevitable facts external to – and unaffected by – politics, this type of discourse leads away from addressing a potential underlying social wrong, such as structural inequality. An example of such a potential wrong may for example, be a society in which the population to a large extent has temporary employment. This type of situation is here, however, presented as a fact (’[t]he development also shifts from’) without any critical reflections regarding its possible causes or negative implications. This lack of problematization of a job market that is in constant transformation is evident throughout the rest of the text in this subchapter.

Section ‘3.4.4. The role of higher education in a digital age’ consists of several calls for action in response to these change processes, specifically
directed towards HE. It is prefaced with a short introductory text that reads:

Extract 2
Digitalization challenges universities and colleges, and accordingly, these will need to change their organization and way of conducting higher education. Sweden should be a leader in the digital transformation of higher education and provide high-quality digital competence for lifelong learning in all areas. Getting there requires extensive changes in the universities’ missions, funding, working methods and governance. (Digitaliseringskommissionen, 2016, p. 112)

This passage starts with an overarching premise, followed by a proposed action. Digitalization – a non-human agent – is here constructed as the force that will prompt universities to discard old ways of practicing and organizing themselves. The use of the future tense ‘will’ in the subclause of the first sentence leaves no room for hesitation or uncertainty as to this prediction. The expectations on HE are communicated through verbs expressing deontic modality: ‘need’ and ‘should’. In the longer text following this first passage, these types of modal verbs – ‘must’, ‘need’, ‘should’ – are used in abundance to express in further details how universities must respond, under headings such as ‘Digital competence must be strengthened’, ‘Prioritize the development of educational technology’ and ‘Education must meet the needs of the business community and changes in the labor market’. Modsals, as Machin and Mayr (2012, p. 191) point out, ‘encode probabilities and certainties, but conceal time and power’. Here, modal verbs of obligation are used strategically to present a solution to the irrefutable facts presented earlier in the subchapter, by framing it in a ‘national space-time’: ‘what national agencies (‘we’, ‘[the] government, “business”) ‘must’ do’. (Fairclough et al., 2002, p. 8). By organizing the text as a problem-solution model and by using discursive strategies to contrast the global space-time with the national, what must be (calls for action) is grounded in and rationalized by what is (a job market in constant change, increasing numbers of individuals with temporary employment etc.).

Telling and Selling the Value of Educational Technology
The title of a passage in the section ‘3.4.4. The role of higher education in a digital age’ in the subchapter ‘3.4. Education and lifelong learning in a digital age’ is ‘Prioritize the development of educational technology’. It is in the imperative mood, again a clear expression of obligation. The whole text of this section is worth analysing in detail, as it is an interesting example of what Fairclough (2010, p. 184) describes as an oscillation between two different genres: ‘selling’ and ‘telling’:

Extract 3
Technology has created a different accessibility to information, knowledge and materials, as well as enabled the development of various forms of social networks for cooperation and collaboration. Universities must be good role models in the use of technology in their activities and in their educations. A total of 60 percent of Swedish higher education institutions state that they conduct development work with regard to digital platforms, 58 percent with regard to e-learning and 55 percent with regard to pedagogical development work. One of the technologies that has opened universities’ eyes to the digital transformation is MOOC, which is described in section 3.4.3. But the development of MOOCs as a new form of higher education and skills development is only a first step in the digitalization of the university system. It should be seen, rather, as a first sign of the extensive need for change that higher education is facing as a result of digitalization. MOOC emphasizes the need for a new web-based pedagogy and structure in higher education, where traditional lecture methods are abandoned in favor of different methods for active learning.

The use of audiovisual aids and multimedia in teaching has increased and more and more lectures are being filmed. This gives students opportunities, regardless of time and place, to process and improve their knowledge through the material that the lecturers choose to convey. Meetings with teachers can then instead be devoted to deepening the understanding by discussing problems and collaborating with other students. This pedagogy is often referred to as the flipped classroom. New digital tools are also needed so that students can collaborate regardless of time and space. In addition, effective ways are needed for individuals to, on their own, validate their knowledge and be able to test their hypotheses, with opportunities to automatically receive feedback on their performances. Today, this can be done through digital self-correcting tests. A development is underway where large amounts of data about students’ working methods, knowledge and knowledge gaps can be collected automatically when they work in digital environments. The data sets can provide very detailed and individualized feedback to the student and to the teacher. Technological developments with new artifacts and products also open up many other possibilities, such as virtual reality, gamification or other technologies that open up for the use of multiple senses in learning and for new forms of learning. (Digitaliseringskommissionen, 2016, pp. 113–4)

The first part of the passage above is a description of the current situation regarding educational technology use at Swedish HE institutions and the impact of so-called MOOCs on universities’ attitudes towards this type of tools. Embedded within this description are less neutral claims, such as that universities must act as role models with regards to the use of technology and that the mere presence of
MOOCs point to the need for HE institutions to rethink their pedagogy on a large scale. Half way through the passage, the text changes character. In contrast to the strong deontic modality expressed by ‘must’, ‘should’ and ‘need’ in the first half, in the second half we find the auxiliary verb ‘can’, which refers to internal ability rather than external obligation. The certainty of the message conveyed by this part comes across as much weaker than in the first half, thus indicating a genre change. Other expressions such as ‘give opportunities’, ‘open up possibilities’ and ‘choose to convey’ also add to the impression that what is described here is an (attractive) offer rather than a requirement. Fairclough (2010), following Chouliaraki (1998), suggests we think of genres as framing devices, indicating how control over action and interaction is either one-sided or shared. While the first half of this text passage informs the readers of the state of the world – it is ‘telling’ in Fairclough’s terms (2010, 184) – the second half has a more persuasive character, it is ‘selling’: look, these are all the opportunities that educational technology can potentially offer. Here, two teaching methods are mentioned specifically. One is the so-called ‘flipped classroom’ method, the promotion of which is legitimized through the use of an English term and the adverb phrases ‘more and more’ and ‘often’, emphasizing its position as a popular and already internationally established teaching technique. The other is automated assessment, presented as a digital technology that can open up new and revolutionizing opportunities for students to validate their knowledge, test out new hypotheses and get feedback on their performance. The obvious alternative, teacher-student feedback processes, is not mentioned. At first glance, the primary benefit of this method rather seems to be the personal experience, as indicated by the portraying of students as ‘individuals’ being assessed ‘on their own’. But another advantage (arguably the most important) is explicitly presented in the text: the collecting of large amounts of data that can be used not just by the individual student but also by their teachers, to gauge the effects of the teaching process. In fact, big data in the form of learning analytics can be used at a much larger scale than that and this is not an uncontroversial matter, as many research articles on the ethics of data collecting in educational environments have emphasized (Boninger et al., 2017; Jones & McCoy, 2019; Roberts-Mahoney et al., 2016; Williamson, 2018). The passage ends with a general statement about the advantages of educational ‘artifacts and products’ that open up new possibilities, new forms of learning and new ways to ‘open up for the use of multiple senses in learning’. Gamification, a behaviour change technique (where game-like elements are used to motivate, or ‘nudge’ individuals to behave in certain ways) is mentioned as one of the ways in which this can be achieved. The effectiveness and ethics of gamification has been debated (Buck, 2017; Dichev & Dicheva, 2017; Tulloch & Randell-Moon, 2018) and the report does not specify in what ways this technique could benefit students’ learning. Neither does it clarify which the ‘old forms of learning’ (as opposed to the ‘new’ ones) are, and in what sense they are insufficient.

Legitimizing Action Through Threats of a Competitive Market

In the subchapter 4.4. Needs identified through the 2016 knowledge compilation, one section (4.4.5) specifically discusses the need for a national digital strategy for Swedish HE, and argues that the government must promote and advance the digitalization process within HE and pay more attention to the needs of the job market. The first paragraph presents the arguments for forming a national strategy, framed as a chain of threats about what will happen if universities do not act quickly in this fast-changing world:

Extract 4

If the universities are not able to meet the development needs that digitalization entails, there is a risk that other agents with significantly greater resources and production competence will take over the packaging of scientific knowledge. The role of universities is then reduced to verifying and certifying achieved qualifications attained in a credible and quality-assuring manner. This involves great risks. If universities lose the commission of knowledge transfer in undergraduate education, they also risk losing appeal for researchers and research. A close connection to undergraduate education is required in order to build a competent leading research organization that is internationally attractive. (Digitaliseringskommissionen, 2016, p. 144)

Not acting can be considered as an alternative option to acting, and its consequences are specifically addressed in this text extract. Several expressions are used to construct a future scenario that would implicate severe and unwanted effects of the failure, on the universities’ side, to act swiftly. The verb ‘able’ and the subclause ‘with significantly greater resources and production competence’ implies a sharp warning message that Swedish universities need to step up their game in order to be competitive. Linguistic representation carries with it associations of values, ideas and activities (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 78). By portraying the universities’ adversaries in broad and vague terms – ‘other agents’ – an ideological squaring is constructed between ‘universities’, a specified and clearly identifiable finite body in society and ‘the others’, a more loosely defined and possibly massive number of actors – thus setting up an opposition
between the two, and implying that the latter is a powerful threat to the former. In the text passage, the field of HE is interdiscursively represented through expressions borrowed from a market discourse: ‘resources’, ‘production competence’ and ‘packaging’, thus signalling that the market is the playing field in which universities now must compete. They can no longer, the text implies, remain being ‘just’ representatives of trustworthiness and high quality, as those qualities will then become all they are useful for. Such an inability to change would, in turn, lead to the next step in the effect chain, that Swedish universities will lose their position as prime conveyers of knowledge and eventually (implied) their research excellence and international reputation. Considering, thus, how the alternative option to taking immediate action in the face of the rapid digital revolution is framed in this text passage, the reader can conclude that this alternative should be rejected. This description of an imminent threat – linguistically disguised as a possible scenario – is followed by a presentation of the advocated option. In the rest of the subchapter a strategy is proposed that will, supposedly, prevent this chain of events through a number of measures, including – in addition to a swift digitalization of HE – an updated and more attractive educational provision and close collaboration with key actors on the market.

Arguing Through Neoliberal Master Narratives

In chapter 5, entitled 'Recommendations', four areas that the commission has deemed most important for the government to prioritize – Organization, Strategy, Leadership and Competence – are listed. For the purpose of this study, the subchapter called ‘5.5. Competence for digitalization – prioritize building competence to ensure welfare and growth in the digital society’ is the one most relevant to study in closer detail. Following a short introductory text about the importance of digital competence within both the private and the public sector, the commission suggests to the government four prioritized areas for action of which two are of direct relevance for the education system:

Extract 5

- to enable lifelong learning by providing a variety of opportunities for the individual to participate in education and skills development throughout life,
- to mobilize the school system and higher education with skills and the ability to develop the activities and educations so that opportunities of digitalization are used to provide students with the skills they need for a digital society and that employers, both public and private, have access to people with the skills required for their activities, (Digitaliseringskommissionen, 2016, pp. 159–60)

In this extract, the importance of offering a ‘variety of opportunities’ for the individual to engage in lifelong learning is emphasized (but not concretized). It exemplifies how, against a background of constructions of change and uncertainty as natural forces, citizens can be aligned to ‘discourses of flexibility, lifelong learning and choice’ (Nicoll, 2006, p. 40), that represent means to empower them in uncertain times. In the second paragraph the intellectual aspects of education are fused with the financial aspects and thereby discursively linked to the economy. New, or better, skills – not knowledge – is the result of the suggested development of education and the purpose is to serve employers with skilled individuals rather than safeguarding the democratic, social and personal functions of the education system. In the paragraph, economic as well as military terminology – the latter represented by the verb ‘mobilize’ – is recontextualized into a political context, framing individuals’ performances as primarily valuable for national productivity purposes. This discursive strategy is also used further down in the text to strengthen the link between digital competence and national economic growth:

Extract 6

It is central to future conditions for growth and welfare that Sweden has access to a workforce with digital skills and that it provides opportunities for individuals to develop the skills needed. (Digitaliseringskommissionen, 2016, p. 160)

In this passage, two levels of interest represented by one on hand the individual’s learning needs (‘opportunities for individuals to develop [the] skills’) and on the other society’s needs (‘a workforce with digital skills’) are merged and constructed as one and the same, via the verb phrase ‘provides opportunities’, through which it is implied that learning the competence in demand by the industry is self-evidently also desirable for the individual.

Both extracts illustrate a reasoning around digitalization of education that is underpinned by an interplay between two neoliberal master narratives (Munro, 2018): Instrumentality and Marketization. Munro describes Instrumentality as ‘the idea that HE serves a mainly utilitarian purpose and is primarily concerned with advancing a country’s economic growth and individuals’ monetary wealth’ and Marketization as ‘the application of neoliberal market economic theory to HE’ (Munro, 2018, p. 3). Through discursive strategies that construct the interplay between these ideologically tainted ideas as
harmonious, arguments for digitalization are strengthened.

Recontextualizing Teaching and Learning

The whole report ends with a 35 pages long vision of the future (‘Scenario: Sweden 2030 – an integrated, smart and competitive digital society’), written by a CEO of an educational company. Its purpose is to ‘highlight the potential of digitalization and point out opportunities provided by technological development’ (Digitaliseringskommissionen, 2016, p. 161). It is written in the present tense, which promotes an interpretation of its contents as undisputable facts rather than guesswork, and describes scenarios in five areas. For the purposes of this study, the section on the area of education and lifelong learning has been analysed. It spans over five pages and concerns all levels of the educational system. One passage describes how learning in 2030 to a larger extent than before is based on experience, and how the role of the teacher has changed. The following is an extract from this passage:

Extract 7

Through quality-assured subject-specific lectures that are accessible to all, the knowledge levels have been raised and differences between schools and geographical areas are evened out. In classrooms, focus is on discussion and problem solving and grades focus on how students achieve individually tailored goals. All marking and correction of basic knowledge takes place automatically, which frees up teachers’ time for in-depth and tutorial teaching. Teachers also teach across geographical boundaries, which means that the lack of, for example, qualified Mathematics teachers is no longer a problem as they can teach classes at a distance via a link. As teachers’ status has been raised with technical development and information is available online, the role of teachers has changed to be guides and mentors in the students’ efforts to develop increasingly qualitative knowledge and to find relevant knowledge and information. (Digitaliseringskommissionen, 2016, p. 171)

Here, while the importance of ‘discussion and problem solving’ for the learning process is at least implicitly argued for, mass delivery of disciplinary content in the form of ‘quality-assured lectures’ is constructed as the key to both intellectual development and reduction of social inequalities. The teachers’ responsibilities are described as heavily reduced as they have been automatized. The word ‘teacher’ is recontextualized, through metaphorical expressions such as ‘mentor’ and ‘guide’, from meaning someone who, in Biesta’s words, ‘is at the heart of the educational process to one who literally stands at the sideline in order to facilitate the learning of his or her ‘learners’.’ (Biesta, 2012, p. 38). Teaching is here decoupled from the teacher’s disciplinary understanding, (potential) field of research, and pedagogical content and curricular knowledge (sensu Shulman (1986)). This passage also implicitly constructs the young student as at the same time both highly self-sufficient and conformative, but also motivated and hard-working – “the students” efforts to develop increasingly qualitative knowledge and to find relevant knowledge and information’ – evoking a neo-liberal image of the learner as ‘a highly individualized, self-regarding and consuming economic actor’ (Lynch, 2006, p. 3). On the same page, in a subsection titled ‘Transboundary forms of work and challenge-driven education’ this image is reinforced through the description of challenge-driven teaching formats:

Extract 8

Education has become more challenge-driven. Instead of having subject-focused teaching, the school of the future is more focused on how knowledge from different areas needs to be combined to solve challenges. Children are often faced with challenges from day one and then have to acquire the necessary knowledge to be able to solve these challenges. Instead of reading blocks with topics – such as accounting finance, etc. students are given a chance to practice their entrepreneurial skills by, for example, starting virtual micro-enterprises and thereby discovering what knowledge they need. The challenge-driven form of education applied in various areas helps individuals to cultivate critical and creative thinking as well as to develop imagination and personality. (Digitaliseringskommissionen, 2016, p. 172)

In this extract, the representation of the student (likely in primary or secondary school’) has similarities to the image that Pechtelidis and Stamou (2017) describe as ‘the competent child’, the crafting of which facilitates a shift of responsibility from adults to children – note that even in the title for this subsection, learning is defined as ‘work’. This image is created through discursive strategies drawing from a neoliberal discourse in which human qualities such as innovation, responsibility and autonomy are ‘exclusively perceived in direct relation to entrepreneurship and the market’ (ibid, 7). These virtues together compose the ‘ethics of self’ of the ideal citizen, as a ‘partner’ to the state rather than someone who relies on its welfare system (Du Gay, 2000, p. 165) or who seeks knowledge for the sake of personal fulfilment. The virtues of entrepreneurship are here conveyed through elements from a business discourse: ‘solve challenges’, ‘challenge-driven’, ‘creative thinking’. Most of the noun phrases describing children in the quote above bear the semantic roles of patients, contributing to a representation of these children – while expected to be responsible and autonomous enough to take on these challenges – as recipients of the educational process: they are
‘faced with challenges’ and ‘given a chance’. The agent is either invisible or impersonalized (‘the school of the future’, ‘the challenge-driven form of education’).

In the final subsection, titled ‘Steps along the way’, some general conditions for schools and universities in 2030 are imagined.

**Extract 9**

In recent years, schools have also become better at collecting and interpreting data about learning behaviors and results. This has led to learning processes being optimized and individually adapted. At the same time curricula and syllabi have been discussed in more open forums where more societal actors have been able to contribute with proposals for improvements in the design of content and learning processes.

To change previously familiar teaching methods used by teachers, incentives have been developed to teach more digitally. At the same time, higher education institutions and educational institutions have greater demands on themselves to ensure that students achieve the set goals in learning, which can also be measured in real time in principle through the technical education systems. Attendance can also to a greater extent be exchanged for learning objectives for the students. The new system also enables students who learn faster to be able to move faster through the education system and also to be able to deepen their knowledge, which is also important to help students cultivate excellence in different areas.

(Digitaliseringskommissionen, 2016, p. 175)

Several discursive constructions of education, teachers, students and learning can be identified here. One is the reconstruction of the school system as a collector of real-time data that will inform decision-making and individualize learning, which puts an emphasis on technology for not only (as in previous extracts) digital packaging, modes of delivery and automatization, but also the mining of data in order to create ‘personalized’ learning systems. The concept ‘learning processes’ is recontextualized as a mechanical operation directed towards measurable goals. These processes can be ‘optimized’ and ‘individually adapted’, allowing results to be ‘measured in real time’ and students to ‘move faster’ through the system. The collectiveness of the traditional classroom is abandoned in favour of a solitary learning process and an individual responsibility to achieve the learning outcomes. Teachers, on the other hand, are constructed as conservative and passive, in need of ‘incentives’ to implement new digital teaching methods in place of the old-fashioned teaching formats they have been accustomed to. This positions teachers – much like their students – as subjects to a gamified system, in which they can be moulded into a preferred role through the use of nudges and rewards, rather than as experienced, capable and trustworthy professionals and experts within their field.

**Discussion**

In relation to our research questions, our results demonstrate that the Swedish national policy for digitalization reproduces normative ideals and power relations that must be considered in relation to a neoliberal discourse. In the policy, future economic growth and welfare is to a large extent hinged on education and on citizens’ will to (re)educate themselves and to manage their human capital in relation to uncertain circumstances and market demands. This is consistent with the educationalization of societal problems, i.e. tasking education to solve problems beyond their power or role and delegating responsibility to educational institutions, as reported in other works on policy (Bridges, 2008; Labaree, 2008). The policy displays a coherent but reductionist neoliberal framing of education, knowledge, learning, students and teachers in relation to public welfare, seemingly at odds with the traditional Swedish values of universality, solidarity and market independence (Cox, 2004). How, then, is such a construction made possible?

Firstly, we suggest, digitalization, as an emerging and indeterminate phenomenon, constitutes a highly pliable policy object that lends itself particularly well to connecting distinct practices and policy fields in a rhizomatic (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) way, creating complex interconnections that allow for certain discourses (in this case neoliberal) to colonize (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999) new domains. In this way, world views, concerns and aspirations can spread horizontally to practices and policy fields where the dissemination of ideas traditionally takes place vertically (Koppenjan et al., 2009) through the agency of elected officials, experts, institutional leaders and civil servants. In the case of the present report, the mission to provide a digitalization strategy for Sweden (to become ‘best in the world at utilizing the opportunities of digitalization’) made it possible to legitimately address several welfare issues (including education) simultaneously, thus facilitating the horizontal transmission of discourses and further reinforcing the importance of digitalization.

Secondly, the soft governance mechanisms involved in the production of the present policy exemplifies how private sector influence is ‘integral to and embedded within public administration of education’ (Cone & Brøgger, 2020, p. 384) and forms part of an explanation of the policy’s uncritical and consistently enthusiastic construction of digitalization of education. The Swedish digitalization commission was a single-member inquiry led by a special investigator – a professor at the Royal Institute of Technology – assisted by an expert group appointed by the government. Over the four years during which the commission was active, a third of the total
the number of members of this group represented tech companies or digital consulting businesses. None of the members were affiliated with the school system (such as teachers or school leaders), and neither of the two researchers appointed to the group represented the discipline of education. Furthermore, the policy is deeply informed by reports published by private sector organizations and consulting companies. This heavy reliance on ‘digital experts’, well positioned to profit from an uncritical approach to digitalization, is not so surprising if we take into consideration the commission’s primary mission to promote digitalization. The circumstances surrounding the writing of the report, together with the results of our analysis of the text, thus illustrates what Ball and Youdell (2008, p. 10) call the privatization of education policy, a process largely influenced by neoliberal discourses arising from complex networks of governance.

Finally, the legitimation of digitalization in the policy is facilitated by the floating definitions of traditional Swedish welfare values. Due to the strong Swedish national identity as a welfare state (in which education is a ‘crucial instrument’ [Lundahl, 2016, p. 4]) policy makers are compelled to make reference to the values associated with this identity when justifying new reforms (Cox, 2004). At the same time, however, because these values – universality, solidarity and market independence – are so vague and unprecise, it is relatively easy to stretch their definitions, thus facilitating acceptance for reforms that would, potentially, stand in contradiction to the original ideas underpinning the welfare state (ibid.). Our analysis of the report show that its argumentation depends on this type of conceptual stretching, a form of discursive drift (Cameron, 1995; Stephanie Taylor, 2015), in a neoliberal direction. For example, in the policy, universality with regards to education is constructed as the provision of a flexible, individualized, and largely digital infrastructure for ‘lifelong learning’ – here narrowly framed in terms of economic growth, productivity and need-orientation. Within a broad interpretation of solidarity, this construction of education, where all citizens are allowed to develop the skills in demand, and by extension equal ‘opportunit[ies] to compete in the labor market’ (Munro, 2017, p. 59), also meets the expectations to address social justice. Unemployment and marginalization can then be understood as a personal failure and a ‘detachment from the moral order of society’ (Fairclough, 2000, p. 52) to self-improve and constantly adjust to changing circumstances and market demands (Dardot & Laval, 2013; Edwards, 2008; Rose, 1989). Finally, in line with the neoliberal discourse, market independence is conceptually stretched to mean the ability of educational institutions to maintain their position as prime conveyors of knowledge in competition with private actors at an emerging global market for digital education.

Future directions

The strong neoliberal framing found in Swedish educational policy is particularly troublesome in the light of the past year’s global emergency switch to online education caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has brought distance education and educational technology to a political focus, and thereby not only further enhanced the influence of EdTech industry over educational practices and politics, but also pushed governments and educational institutions into an ‘unfreezing’ (Lewin, 1947) process that includes ‘attempts to thoroughly embed public education systems and practices, at international reach, in increasingly powerful technological systems’ (Williamson et al., 2020, pp. 107–8). Overly simplistic and enthusiastic conclusions, framed as ‘lessons from a pandemic for the future of education’ (European Distance and E-learning Network, 2021) or as an opportunity to ‘reimagine education’ (United Nations, 2020) have already showed up in international as well as national reports and educational conference calls. This raises concerns about the future of education and further stresses the importance of un rushed critical reflection. Following the present study, and as a next step in a larger inquiry into governance in relation to digitalization of education, we intend to concentrate on the interconnections between actors and networks that are influential for policy making on digitalization of education. Using network ethnography (Ball, 2015), we will trace the paths through which discourses and ideas travel within and between various networks. This methodology makes it possible to put the spotlight on the ‘who’, ‘where’ and ‘how” in the policy making process (Allen & Bull, 2018), including the social relations and performances that have an impact on the formulation of policy on digitalization of education. Such analyses, we suggest, will be particularly important in relation to production of national and local strategies and action plans that will follow in the wake of the pandemic pedagogy experiment, as they allow us to critically examine the various modes of interplay between different actors involved in such policy making, as well as the methods and practices involved.
Notes

1. The title, in English ‘For digitalization with the times’ (our translation) alludes to the Swedish king’s motto ‘For Sweden with the times’.
2. Ministry of Enterprise and Innovation.
3. The other themes are: The data driven society; The social contract in a digital society; The balance between societal development and protection of personal privacy; Digitalization for a sustainable climate; and New economical patterns challenging GDP statistics.
4. Chapter titles have been translated into English.
5. Text passages have been translated into English and footnotes in the original text have been removed.
6. Massive Open Online Courses.
7. In Swedish, the word ‘student’ is commonly used to describe primarily university students, while the word ‘elev’ (pupil) describes a K12 or high school student. In the analysed text, however, these words are used interchangeably to describe learning subjects of all ages.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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