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The BEEP – a Democracy Assurance, an Administrative Curse, and a Shortcut to Better Grades?

In order of justice, institutions in democratic societies are subjected to public investigations. To facilitate this, the rules of the institutions must be public, but also documentation of their actions and performance. In Sweden, this is regulated in the law of *Tryckfrihetsförordningen*, but is often referred to as *Offentlighetsprincipen* (OP). OP empowers any citizen to, without needing to reveal his or her identity, access public documents at Swedish institutions. *Universitetskanslerämbetet* (the Higher Education Authority) has defined an interpretation of OP for Swedish universities, and this includes citizens' access to past exam questions, all students' answers, examiner markings and grades.

We were informed by a university administrator that there are dominant patterns in the OP requests of course documents. First, the requestor is a current student. Secondly, the request does not regard courses where the student has received a grade, but current or upcoming courses for the requesting student. Thirdly, the request regards only documents of top-performers (often "the five best"). For the purpose of this text, we label such requests with the acronym BEEP (request for Best Earlier Exam Papers).

We have interviewed a small sample of students, administrators and examiners at a selection of Swedish universities. An examiner at an American university was also interviewed.

Some students were not aware of the opportunity of getting access to past exams. The students who had used the opportunity did so to improve their grades, but would not have done it had the marking criteria been clearer. Students generally did not mind having their own exam texts read by others, with the exception of when their author identities would be known by the readers.

The administrators confirm the pattern of students requiring old exams with the intent to improve their own performance. All interviewed administrators signalled a strong commitment to honouring OP. Interestingly, at the same time, they signalled concern with the BEEPs. An in-depth interview with one administrator showed that she was frustrated for several reasons:

1. Although BEEPs defy scheduling, they need to be responded to promptly. Thus, they disturb work already planned.
2. Responding to BEEPs take some time, as there are no predefined administrative routines to handle them. (Specifically, they required a creation of a subset of documents; the creation of the subset and the downloading of the documents are done in different computer systems; the latter system is unavailable to the administrator, requiring her to coordinate the work effort with others).
3. The administrator believes that the true purpose of a BEEP is perhaps not to safeguard our democracy or the quality of the university performance, but to get the requesting student a shortcut to better grades without the effort of better learning.
4. The administrator is used to being courteously asked for help, and feels humiliated in those cases when students triumphantly calls on the OP to order her to attend to their BEEPs.
5. And finally, the administrator believes that the better she gets at responding the BEEPs, the more BEEPs she will get.

The examiners' responses were similar to the administrators; 'it is important that we comply with this' while at the same time being concerned that this is a shortcut for students to get better grades without getting better knowledge (Young 2008; Sparks 2011), and that it is stressful for the administrators.

In conclusion, we regard the BEEP as a phenomenon that exists as a side-effect of the good bureaucracy. It is appreciated as an opportunity by students to better understand marking criteria, but at the same time being regarded as a integrity threat for students who risk having their exams copied. Examiners honour OP to the letter but some also play shadow-games (Uyterhoven 1972, 1989; Wickenberg 2004) to prevent students from being able to use BEEPs in practice.

Our brief investigation has given rise to a number of further questions:

Do BEEPs enable students to better learning, or to better grades? Do perhaps BEEPs give students' the perception of better control of their studying process? If BEEPs produce satisfactory outcomes, are there more efficient ways of producing the same outcome?

If, on the other hand, BEEPs produce unwanted shortcuts to better grading with lesser learning, are there ways of circumventing BEEPs while still honouring OP? Do perhaps the occurrence of BEEPs serve as indicators of examiners having become too predictable?

References

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