Is the interest of case studies declining - the case of Sweden

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Abstract

Purpose
The purpose of this study is to develop a deeper understanding regarding the interest of case studies in Sweden. The paper aims to investigate if the interest has declined to better understand the relevancy of further case study developments in Sweden.

Methodology
The methods used for this paper were on one hand a qualitative research, where data was collected from multiple scientific as well as other sources for a deeper understanding of the interest of case studies. On the other hand, a quantitative research was conducted to see if published case studies have declined or not, which could be close related to interest.

Findings
An indication of an increase in interest of case studies can be seen. There is a positive trend regarding published material in Sweden relevant to the topic case studies. Further, a renewed discussion regarding case studies as a scientific product or used for learning purposes has emerged which could be seen as an indication of interest as well.

Research limitations
To be able to conduct this research, only case studies as well as articles about the subject published in Sweden and found on the databases; Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar were included in the study.

Originality/value
This literature review offers a greater understanding of the value of case studies itself. A deeper understanding of the interest of case studies could be beneficial to both organizations as well as academic institutions.
**Introduction**

Case studies has been defined in different ways. It is complex and may also be why many views it differently. It has been defined as an “in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, program or system in a real-life context”, by Simons (2009, p. 21). Another definition of case studies has been defined as “an intensive study of a single unit with an aim to generalize across a larger set of units”, by Gerring (2004). Flyvbjerg (2003), states that around the subject of case studies, there are many misunderstandings and professionals all around the globe view case studies differently. This has caused many debates on how and why to use case studies.

Johansson (2000), states that case studies is more common in professions and practical activities such as health and medicine, economy, law, education and management. According to Tärnvik (2004), case studies has been used in business and law educations for as long as one century. Within studies in medicine, case studies have not been used to the same extent as business and law, but has more recently become more common (Tärnvik, 2004). However, Solberg Søilen and Huber (2006) states that case studies in the extent to which it has been used in scientific purposes, case studies in the field of medicine was among the first one. This statement is supported by Simons (2009), who says that the first case studies were in the field of medicine and law.

In the late 1980’s teachers’ educators all over the world were beginning to understand the benefits of case studies as a learning method, and this were taught to teaching students (Richardson, 1997). Although many companies and institutions are using case studies as a method for developing a deeper understanding, very limited research has been done regarding the interest of case studies in general. Since case studies has been a method for learning for a very long time (Tärnvik, 2004), one can assume that there at least has been a prior interest regarding case studies in general all over the world. However, what we do not know is if this interest has declined or not, and not specifically in Sweden. This paper aims to provide a deeper understanding of the interest of case studies in Sweden.

This leads us to the question:

*Has the interest of case studies declined within Sweden?*

**Methodology**

To be able to answer the question, both a qualitative and a quantitative research has been conducted. Since there is a limited research on the specific topic, a collection of data has been done to gather statistics about the amount of case studies published within Sweden, as well as articles about the subject case studies in general. To understand the level of interest in Sweden, it is necessary to know the amount of case studies developed over the
years. Further, it was also important to look at articles about case studies, e.g. articles about case studies as a learning method. This was done by looking at several of the biggest databases, and collecting data of the amount case studies published. Since there is a huge amount of case studies, the limitation of only involving the case studies or articles with the word “case study” somewhere in the text or title. Moreover, only the ones who were published in Sweden were involved. This limitation was necessary although it is excluding all the articles and cases published outside of Sweden but may be used for e.g. learning purposes in Swedish classes.

This quantitative research is then supported by a qualitative research where data has been collected from various sources to try to get a grip of the interest of case studies. Moreover, since this is a topic where few studies have been conducted, a qualitative research of what defines case studies, what it is used for and why was needed to be able to answer the question more accurate. This study is supported by both primary and secondary sources. The latter are both scientific as well as popular science articles and other nonscientific sources. A great number of different sources has been collected and carefully studied in order to try get a better understanding of the interest, what it entails and to get a grip of the level of interest.

**Empirical data**

When further investigating the history of case studies, from where and when it was developed, sources have different views. Solberg Søilen and Huber (2006) states that many believe that case studies has its origins at Harvard University, although this is an misunderstanding. According to Jensen and Sandström (2016), case studies has existed as long as humans have documented stories. An often-used example of an early case study is the case of Sir Isaac Newton, where he studied gravitation using apples. During the 1920's, the first sign of case studies as we view them today were developed and used by Harvard University (Jensen & Sandström, 2016), and may be why the misunderstanding of its origins exist. Understanding where case studies has its origins, is a beginning of understanding how case studies has evolved over the years and get closer to deciding the level of interest.

To be able to solve the question whether there is a declining interest of case studies or not, a proper definition of interest needs to be presented. Below are three definitions of interest; (Dictionary, 2016)

- “The feeling of a person whose attention, concern or curiosity is particularly engaged by something”
- “Something that concerns, involves, draws the attention of, or arouse the curiosity of a person”
- “Power of exciting such concern, involvement, etc.; quality of being interesting”
Measuring the interest of a phenomenon or in this case; case studies, is a complicated procedure. However, these definitions guide us towards a better understanding if there could be such an interest of case studies in Sweden, and to be able to decide the level of it. The three definitions presented above will be further discussed in this paper.

According to Thomas (2011), many different sources reveals that case studies within economics and political science show a steady level of usage, and may even be increasing in terms of application. Moreover, Bennet, Barth and Rutherford (2003), has looked at fourteen different journals, and concluded that case studies were employed in about 20% within two fields of research in social science. This percentage was taken over a period between 1975 and 2000. However, these statistics are not only for Sweden, but for the whole of Internet. In Sweden, there are still many cases published in the field of social sciences as well (e.g. Palm, 2016; Svensson & Rosvall, 2016; Söderström & Håmås, 2016; Gustafsson, 2016; Andrén, 2016). Lindvall (2007) acknowledge that case studies have never lacked advocates. A great amount of case studies is published every year in scientific journals in Sweden.

During the last decay, a discussion about case studies and their role in science has been renewed (Jensen & Sandström, 2016). According to Lindvall (2007), many agree that case studies have a great contribution to political science, because of the fact that case studies is used as a complement to other studies in the field. Moreover, using case studies within this field has almost become mandatory. Further, there have been statements that emphasizes the importance of giving attention to case studies by Swedish case practioners, and that many say that they have a high interest in continuing developing the case study method (Elzinga, 1980).

In Sweden, both authorities as well as private business are publishing case studies from their own operations onto their websites. Swedish security service, one of the highest levels of the police force in Sweden, are continuously publishing cases available for anyone at no charge (Säkerhetspolisen, 2016). One example of a case published includes the security of sensitive data on various databases, and their operations towards protecting this data (Säkerhetspolisen, 2016). The government of Sweden has also published in year 2000, case studies of five authorities regarding consultant use and their purpose in all different operations (Statskontoret, 2000). A school in Sweden, which are located on four different places in Sweden, are exclusively using case studies in their education of young people. They support the use of this method for teaching young students in various subjects by stating that they are learning to better understand and solve real life problems in a smarter and more effective way (Sjölingsgymnaisum, 2016).

Further, on various databases, Swedish case studies are found which are used in a more scientific way. One case discusses the difficulties and risks involving the design of bridges, and used a real-life example of a construction project in Sweden (Björnsson, 2017). This is a case study in engineering, which has not been mentioned as one of the most common areas of use when it comes to case studies. Another case recently published is a case about
human rights in Sweden (Naartijärvi, 2016). This is a case done in the field of law, which is an area that, as earlier stated, have been a common area regarding case studies. One can also find recent published cases in the field of medicine, which as earlier stated by Tärnvik (2004) has become a more common area. One case found is about the correlations between reduced risk of stroke and fish consumption (Wennberg, Jansson, Norberg, Skerfving, Strömberg, Wiklund & Bergdahl, 2016). Further, in the field of music education, case studies have begun to be interpreted in their method of learning as well (Berret, 2014; Abraham & Head, 2005; Conway, 1999; Hourigan, 2006).

Case studies has both positive and negative aspects. One benefit regarding case studies as a learning method have been where a complex situation could be explained easier for a better and deeper understanding (Iveroth, 2016). This statement is supported by several sources (e.g Starman, 2013). Further, case studies could be used to test theories as well as develop new ones. Case studies also brings more qualitative data, which also contributes to science. One of the negative aspects of case studies that has been brought up is that case studies, considered by some, are not scientific and thereby lacks scientific credibility. Moreover, it has been difficult to gain access to interesting cases and due to cases complexity sometimes very hard to analyze (Iveroth, 2016) Following the definitions of interest, one can conclude that a discussion about these positive and negative aspects is a sign of initial interest, since it is involving people as well as concerning some.

Further, relating to the definitions of interest, an indication of interest concerning case studies in Sweden could be seen when looking at the amount of case studies published. However, note that this data only gives an indication of interest, where only one aspect of what defines interest is included; something that draws the attention to a specific thing. Something that is published often, and read by many, is related to this aspect of the definitions above.

When searching for case studies on different databases, the result varies. In table 1, all the search result is shown for two of the major databases in scientific purposes, and Google Scholar, which is a database linked to many other databases. As mentioned, all the searches are limited to Swedish publications as well as case studies or articles about the subject of case studies.
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Table 1. Number of published case studies and articles about case studies in three different databases over time.

Scopus, in comparison to the other two databases in the research, has a great amount of published material. Both Scopus and Web of Science have a steady increase over time. Google Scholar has declined in the amount of publications in the time-period ranging from 2011 to present day. However, since the last time-period is not in proportion to the other, who involves a time-period of ten years, and the last one only six years. Below is a diagram of same material published, showing the increase over time.

Diagram 1. Published case studies and articles about case studies in three different databases over time.
**Analysis**

Looking at the three definitions of interest stated above, there are several aspects which one could use to decide the level of interest. The first definition involved the word “attention”, which could be related to the amount of cases published as well as the discussion concerning e.g. case studies as a learning method or if it can be viewed as a scientific product.

Arguments about using case studies as a learning method has been presented above. The fact that these arguments are discussed is an indication of some initial interest. However, what we do not know from this discussion is if some aspect is more important than the other. This study does not measure these although they could be an indication of the level of interest. A method that is seen to be more positive than negative often is related to a high interest of using that method. Although, it also depends on what the negative aspects are, and how crucial they are for the result and the finished product. As stated, Richardson (1997) describes that the benefits of using case studies in education were beginning to be commonly presented to teacher students in the 1980’s. The fact that it does not seem to have been that common before 1980, could be an indication that the level of interest began to rise during this period. Tärnvik (2004), stated that case studies have been used for a long time, but has recently began to rise. Further, Tärnvik (2004), also brings up the benefits of using case studies in Swedish medical education. This could also be an indication of the interest overall in Sweden. A school in Sweden using only case studies in their education could also be an indication that the interest is high in Sweden, not only to the fact that they exclusively use case studies as their learning method, but also that this

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*Diagram 2. Trends of published material over time.*
school is found on four different locations in Sweden. This tells us that it is not only a small amount of people teaching and learning this in school, but a greater amount since it involves several schools.

Moreover, the renewed discussion could also be an expression of interest. The fact that people want to improve the case study method to be able to better use case studies in the future is in a way a sign of interest. Relating to the three definitions of interest, something that concerns or involved people is of interest for those people. The discussion of an improved method for case studies, both the development of them as well as the use of case studies could then indicate of a high interest in Sweden. This discussion is current today (Jensen & Sandström, 2016), and has been written and talked about since 1990’s (Berret, 2014). Thomas (2011), concludes that many sources within economics and political science have a steady level of usage, which could be an indication of a steady level of interest. What is also presented in Thomas’s (2011) article, is that the level of usage may even be increasing. This statement is supported by Diagram 2, where there is shown an increase of published cases as well as articles concerning case studies in general. There is a positive trend of published material concerning case studies, however, all published material taking into account in this study is material accessed online. Since internet was not common before 1997 (Wikipedia, 2016), these results could be a misrepresentation of the actual published cases, since all the Swedish case studies published may not be published online as well. However, an indication of interest is clearly seen although internet was not that common before. It also needs to be said that many cases today are only published online, since it is a source almost every scientist and employed person use.

**Conclusion**

Deciding the level of interest if a difficult task. However, as prior stated, an indication of the level of interest in Sweden can be seen. Regarding the discussion about case studies as a learning method, many people are involved and are writing about it in articles as well as case studies. Further, other fields of studies which have not prior been using case studies for learning has now started to see the benefits of using cases. Field such as the music business are getting more involved in the discussion on how to use the method in their area of business. Moreover, following the definition of interest, one can clearly see that an indication of interest can be seen in the amount of case studies and articles about cases as a learning method published from 1980 and forward. The amount of material published have increased recent years, which could be a sign of a higher interest. This study sees no sign of a declining interest in Sweden, although further research is needed. In the future, to better understand the real level of interest, a major quantative study needs to be conducted, involving a broader set of limitations.
References


