Introduction to special issue on learning, innovation systems and policy in honour of Bengt-Åke Lundvall

Susana Borrás, Jan Fagerberg and Charles Edquist

This special issue celebrates the work of Bengt-Åke Lundvall on his 70th birthday. In the 1980s and 1990s he was a key player among a small group of academics in the USA and Europe that developed a new, systemic approach to the study of the interactions between science, innovation, and policy. He contributed to the popularity of the approach in the policy community in several ways, among other things through his period as Deputy Director at the Directorate for Science, Technology and Industry at the OECD between 1992 and 1995, and through his later work for the European Commission, as evidenced among other things by the highly influential booklet, *The Globalising Learning Economy: Implications for Innovation Policy*. His strong emphasis on learning, a hallmark of Lundvall’s approach, is also evident in much of his recent work. This issue has six papers written by some of his collaborators.

The EDITORS AND PUBLISHER of *Science and Public Policy* are proud to announce this special issue of the journal in honour of Bengt-Åke Lundvall on his 70th birthday.

Few have contributed more to the topic of this journal than Lundvall. In the 1980s and 1990s he was a key player among a small group of academics in the USA and Europe that developed a new, systemic approach to the topic, focusing on the interactions between science, innovation, and policy. This resulted among other things in the 1992 book, *National Systems of Innovation: Towards a Theory of Innovation and Interactive Learning*, in which Lundvall and colleagues laid out a new perspective on science, innovation and policy, with learning, particularly between users and producers of technology, as the central focus. As shown in the paper by Fagerberg and Sapprasert in this issue, the book became highly influential among both academics and policy-makers, and continues to be a standard reference on the subject today.

Lundvall contributed to the popularity of the approach in the policy community in several ways, among other things through his period as Deputy Director at the Directorate for Science, Technology and Industry at the OECD between 1992 and 1995, and through his later work for the European Commission, as evidenced among other things by the highly influential booklet, *The Globalising Learning Economy: Implications for Innovation Policy* (with Susana Borrás) published by the European Commission in 1999.

Lundvall is widely recognized today as one of the leading figures in the rapidly growing field of ‘innovation studies’. A survey of researchers in this field identified Lundvall as one the chief sources inspiration for scholarly work in this area, only surpassed by Joseph Schumpeter, Richard Nelson and Christopher Freeman (Fagerberg and Verspagen, 2009). As is well
known, Schumpeter was active during the first half of the previous century, long before the field really started to take off, while Nelson and Freeman were among the pioneers that shaped the emerging field during the early stages of its development from the late 1950s onwards. Compared to these three, Lundvall is a relative newcomer to the field, as his work in this area did not come to fruition until the mid–late 1980s, but a very influential one. Arguably, few have done more than Lundvall when it comes to shaping the contemporary research agenda in this area.

After studying economics at the University of Gothenburg in his native country, Sweden, Lundvall moved in 1973 to the newly founded Aalborg University Center (AUC) in Northern Jutland, Denmark. AUC — which later became Aalborg University (AAU) — was from the very beginning characterized by a strong emphasis on cross-disciplinarity. One of the cross-disciplinary environments at the new university, one combining engineering and social science, was ‘the Institute of Production’, with which Lundvall became affiliated. In 1977, Lundvall and his colleagues in Aalborg formed the IKE group (literally the ‘International Competitiveness Group’), which still exists today.

The interests of the group were, as described by Fagerberg and Sapprasert in this issue, learning processes in industries and firms, and how these are conditioned by (and interact with) social, institutional and cultural factors (and policy). Initially, the term ‘national system of production’ was used to characterize the dynamics of this ‘learning economy’, but this soon gave way to the concept of a ‘national system of innovation’, which is what Lundvall and his group became most famous for. Christopher Freeman, generally acknowledged as the first to use the concept in a published work (Freeman, 1987), has credited Lundvall and his colleagues with being the originators of the term. Although this is difficult to verify with certainty (Sharif, 2006), what is absolutely clear is that Lundvall and his colleagues contributed in a very significant way to the development of the approach and to its application in various areas of policy research, such as regional studies (as evidenced by the more recent concept of a ‘regional innovation system’ [Breznyk et al., 1998]).

The establishment of the IKE group led to a series of research projects in the 1980s and 1990s on industrial development in Denmark, focusing at the firm, industry and national levels, in which Lundvall played a key role as initiator and leader. This research resulted, among other things, in a book by Lundvall on the evolution of the Danish economy with the title, Innovation, Growth and Social Cohesion: the Danish Model (Lundvall, 2002). In this, Lundvall further developed his vision of ‘the learning economy’ (Lundvall and Johnson, 1994) and, particularly, the role of national institutions, education and training systems, and of labour markets for learning and, hence, for improving economic performance.

The strong emphasis on learning, which Fagerberg and Saprprasert in this issue point to as a hallmark of Lundvall’s approach, is also evident in much of his recent work, such as the book with Edward Lorenz entitled, How Europe’s Economies Learn (Lorenz and Lundvall, 2006), which extends the perspective to a broader and more diverse sample of countries than just Denmark, as well as several other journal articles by Lundvall in recent years.

Lundvall is not only an eminent scholar, he is also a very inspiring and entrepreneurial project initiator, leader and organizer of frameworks for the further development of the field. In addition to the research projects mentioned above, he, together with other colleagues, initiated the DRUID network (the Danish research unit on industrial dynamics) and served as its first Research Director (1996–2001). As the name suggests, this was originally a rather local Danish affair but has subsequently developed into a thriving global network for scholarly interaction and the training of young researchers.

Lundvall’s most recent initiative is the Globelics network, which, initiated and coordinated by Lundvall, organizes annual conferences on innovation systems, emphasizing particularly the developing
part of the world. Lundvall has been the principal originator of this organization, which is providing an intellectual home for economists and other social scientists from all over the world, and particularly from developing countries, who see economic development as a learning and capability-building process.

Lundvall’s emphasis on developing fruitful frameworks for the field’s development does not mean that he is not a productive researcher; on the contrary, as evidenced by his list of publications, he is one of the leaders. Moreover, and unusually among researchers, Lundvall’s productivity seems to be increasing strongly with age. During the last decade he has published more than 20 papers in journals, 10 books and 40 book chapters! There is no doubt more to look forward to.

References