

# Quality convergence report: Sweden<sup>1</sup>

## Executive summary

- Swedish higher education institutions enjoy a high degree of autonomy with regard to, for example, curricula, internal allocation of resources and appointment of staff.
- Sweden has a well-developed national understanding of quality assurance in higher education and its national procedures and processes have evolved and gone through a number of different methods since 1993.
- The current emphasis is on national programme-level evaluation with the aim of providing students and other stakeholders with useful information.
- Very possibly, the national evaluation process will evolve further over the coming years.
- Students have clearly defined and extensive rights in the field of quality assurance and enhancement – these rights are enshrined in the Higher Education Ordinance and are widely accepted. The only concern is the lack of wide representation.
- The age profile of teaching staff is an issue that must be addressed through recruitment of younger staff over the next 15 years or so. The need varies across faculties.
- The importance of teaching skills is recognised in the recruitment process.
- At present, the scale of national evaluation at programme level is such that it precludes most internal evaluation at institutional level. It is likely that institutions will develop their own processes

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<sup>1</sup> More detailed information may be found on the website of the National Agency for Higher Education (Högskoleverket): [www.hsv.se](http://www.hsv.se)

The following reports are particularly informative: The Third Report on the National Reviews of Swedish Higher Education by The International Advisory Board, Högskoleverkets rapportserie 2003:34, How Did Things Turn Out? The National Agency's Quality Appraisals 2002, 2003:25 R, Swedish universities & university colleges – Short version of annual report 2003, The National Reviews of Swedish Higher Education, The International Advisory Committee to the National Agency for Higher Education, Report 2002:38 R, How did things turn out? The National Agency's Quality Audits and Evaluations 2001.

in the future and will be given more responsibility for managing their own quality assurance processes.

- The current structure of degrees and awards is now under review with the likelihood that a Bologna structure will be adopted. This will impact on the role of the National Agency.

### **Size and scope of the higher education system**

Sweden has 39 institutions of higher education. 36 of them are state agencies, reporting directly to the Government (Ministry of Education and Science). One is private and two are foundations with their own capital, and partly their own regulations. The last three all have formal agreements with the Government on the principles of education and research, and receive most of their funding from the state. Finally, several private educational establishments have received the right to award certain specified degrees.

It is a unitary system including all post-secondary education. Of the 39 institutions, 14 have full degree-awarding powers, 7 have the right to award Bachelors and Masters degrees and have powers to award Ph.D.s in certain areas. The remaining 18 have the right to award Bachelors and (with some limitations) Masters degrees. They include a number of small, specialised colleges (visual and performing arts, teacher training, sports).

A Higher Education Act and Higher Education Ordinance provide the general framework under which institutions should operate, e.g. the goals of higher education, the degree structure, governance structure, the roles of staff and students, admissions and appointment procedures.

The Degree Ordinance specifies the degrees to be awarded by HEIs. They include General degrees (3 year Bachelor, 1 year Master, 4 year Ph.D.) and Professional Degrees (c. 50 programmes of varying length and contents, oriented to specific professions). It should be noted that Sweden has not as yet developed a degree structure conforming fully to the Bologna process. The main difference is that, mainly for budgetary reasons, the Masters degree is defined as an undergraduate degree. An enquiry to look into the consequences of such changes and to propose a new degree structure will publish its findings in March, and is expected to propose adjustments in the direction of a 3-2-3 structure as well as the introduction of the ECTS system.

The National Agency for Higher Education has special roles vis-à-vis the HEIs, e.g. legal monitoring, information on higher education to current and future students, to the Government and Parliament and to the public. Further, it is responsible for higher education statistics and, its major task, for evaluating higher education.

The emphasis of evaluation processes has shifted. Between 1995 and 2002 the overall model was institutional quality audit. After two three-

year cycles audits were (temporarily?) phased out and followed by systematic evaluation of programmes and subjects at all HEIs over a six-year period. This model is supplemented by a few thematic institutional evaluations of e.g. internationalisation and cooperation with society (“the third task”). Parallel to these systems, the Agency has a major validation role, in that it evaluates colleges which apply for partial or full university status and private or public institutions which apply for the right to award general and professional degrees. This experience has informed the present design of programme and subject review.

## **Institutional Autonomy**

### **Higher education institutions and the government**

Universities and colleges enjoy a fairly high degree of autonomy within the general framework of the Higher Education Act. The Act lays down the general principles and the institutions interpret them. Parliament decides on the overall allocation of funds to each institution, but the institution decides on the internal allocation. The Higher Education Ordinance establishes the degree *system*, i.e. what degrees may be awarded by Swedish higher education institutions, but the institutions decide their own curricula. The government lays down the structure of academic staff, but institutions decide which posts they want to establish and make all appointments, except that of Vice-Chancellor.

### **Impact of and on quality assurance**

#### ***Quality audit***

The overall relationship between HEIs and the National Agency for Higher Education has shifted as a result of the above-mentioned change of emphasis of national quality assurance from institutional level (audit), which was essentially enhancement-oriented and based on institutional quality assurance policies, to a more accountability-oriented programme/subject level.

Audits looked at processes designed to assure and improve the quality of all provision by the institution in relation to a number of aspects:

- Strategy for implementation of quality assurance processes
- Academic leadership
- Co-operation with stakeholders
- Participation in quality enhancement and assurance by staff
- Integration of quality work in all activities at the institution
- Evaluation and follow-up activities
- Internationalisation

- External professional relations
- Gender equality

More generally, the aim was to determine whether universities and colleges were developing “a culture that enables a continual improvement throughout /their/ operations” (Högskoleverket 1996<sup>2</sup>).

Later, the National Agency came to identify a structure of quality work based on the attainment of four levels, each of them presupposing the attainment of the previous one:

- Establishing goals
- Planning and carrying out activities to reach the goals
- Identifying and evaluating results
- Taking steps to improve and integrate quality work in ordinary steering processes

The identification of these levels has had an influence on the way in which institutions conducted their quality work, and has thus affected the degree of institutional autonomy in this respect. Some institutions have objected to this view of quality enhancement and assurance, in particular colleges of visual and performing arts, and only a third of the total number of institutions may be said to have reached the fourth and final step.

### ***Thematic audits***

The systematic audits of higher education institutions were supplemented, on the Agency’s initiative, by a thematic audit in 1999. This was an attempt to evaluate how universities and colleges assure and develop certain quality aspects, in this case gender equality, student influence and social and ethnic diversity. The evaluation covered all 39 universities and colleges and was carried out in the course of about 12 months on the basis of answers to a questionnaire and site visits by a review panel.

The thematic audit had an immediate effect by highlighting the specific themes involved. Social and ethnic diversity as quality aspects had not been subjected to scrutiny before and there was a heated debate on the choice of themes. A follow-up last autumn showed that all three phenomena had by then become more or less accepted, that most institutions had made considerable efforts to increase participation of underrepresented groups, and that students were serving on committees and boards on which they had not been represented previously.

A further subject of debate was that the audit was clearly comparative, in that it identified the top five institutions in each of the categories.

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<sup>2</sup> The National Quality Audit of Higher Education in Sweden (Stockholm: Högskoleverket Reports 1996:10R). This report and other information are found on the website of the National Agency for Higher Education (Högskoleverket): [www.hsv.se](http://www.hsv.se)

Thus, the criteria for evaluation were discussed and questioned by the staff, students and academic leaders.

### ***From audit to programme and subject review***

The shift in emphasis from audit to programme and subject review, which has taken place over the past couple of years can be accounted for mainly by the fact that students and other stakeholders including the Government felt that they did not receive sufficient information on the quality of the actual provision. This is due partly to the fact that the audits have affected mostly top management and the faculty levels, and, to a lesser extent, departments, individual staff members and students. Many students maintained that they wanted comparative information on a subject-by-subject basis across the nation.

Programme and subject reviews, like audits, are peer reviews, which include the well-known elements of self-study, site-visit and public report. The review cycle is six years.

They have the three-fold aim of development, control and information to students, the government and the general public. They look at prerequisites in the form of infrastructure, funding, staff qualifications and the student body. Processes, such as teaching, examination and learning support are assessed, though classroom observation is not included. Finally, result variables, e.g. the general quality of undergraduate theses, throughput and student satisfaction, are scrutinised. The model also involves possible negative consequences in the form of institutions losing their degree-awarding powers for inferior provision of programme/subject. It should be added that in contrast to most other quality assurance systems the Swedish system includes postgraduate provision and Ph.D. programmes.

This change has clearly had an impact on institutional autonomy. It is true that the implementation has been discussed in meetings between HEIs and the Agency and that a general degree of consensus was reached. But for the individual departments it has involved efforts that are both new to several of them and time-consuming. At the central level, too, many institutions have had to make arrangements to assist departments in their implementation of the self-studies and site-visits, and in following up evaluation reports and taking steps to improve conditions in case of less favourable results. Thus, in some cases it has been felt that institutional autonomy has been at risk. This threat, however, is felt less acutely now that institutions have got used to procedures and processes, and that evaluation processes have been adjusted to better suit the individual subject or programme.

It is interesting that both the department level and the central institutional level have been affected by the current evaluation model. It has thus impacted also on the quality work of the university or college as a whole,

There has been, and still exists, a debate following three lines of argument:

- autonomy – intrusion on institutional autonomy
- standardisation
- costs of evaluations incurred by university and department.

This debate was quite heated to begin with, but has toned down over the past year. In some respects (and in some quarters) the programme evaluations are regarded as an educational project on evaluation reaching out to all teachers and students. It is argued that in the long run the knowledge gained will make it easier for institutions to conduct their own subject evaluation programmes, thus making national reviews unnecessary.

Today, if there is a debate, it is mainly on the grounds for withdrawing degree-awarding powers and has to do with institutional freedom to interpret the Higher Education Act and Ordinance. It is also concerned with the model (prerequisites, process, results) and hinges on the difficulty of focusing on results (outcomes). This, some maintain, leads to risks of standardisation of the organisation and even contents of studies. It is a debate between the departments, to some extent the central evaluation offices at (some of) the institutions on the one hand, and the National Agency on the other. It has to do with the question of whether reviews have moved in the direction of control, accountability and compliance with minimum standards rather than encouraging enhancement.

The Ministry and Parliament are happy with the current situation. It is unclear, however, what developments will take place at the end of the present cycle. It is not unlikely that in the future institutions may take over the responsibility for programme and subject review and that the Agency will have a different role.

#### ***Accreditation – evaluation, audit - validation***

Accreditation is not a major source of disagreement in Sweden. It is defined as a way of dealing with the results of a programme/subject review, leading to a yes or a no, to the question whether an institution should maintain its right to award a specific degree or not. Today there is a discussion carried on mainly by representatives of business studies and engineering, who want accreditation by international accreditation agencies for reasons of attracting good students. It does not really affect the rest of the academic community, however.

The Agency validates programmes leading to professional degrees. This is done following an application from an institution, which gives a

description of its preconditions for offering a specific degree (number of current and projected students, scientifically qualified staff, infrastructure, etc.). It is then visited by a group of experts who recommend (or not) degree-awarding powers. A similar process exists for upgrading colleges to full or partial university status, although the decision whether or not to upgrade is made by the government.

This latter procedure has had a great impact on improvement processes in colleges. The right to award a higher degree means that the institution is likely to be able to attract more and better students from the whole country as well as more highly qualified staff.

### **Summary**

- The current emphasis of evaluations is on subject and programme review rather than on quality audit. The main reason for this shift of emphasis is students' insistence on comparative information on subject and programme provision across the country. This engendered a debate on the autonomy of institutions, which has now subsided.
- Evaluations are based on an assessment of prerequisites, processes and results and the relationship between these stages is emphasised.
- Accreditation plays a limited role, but is a feature in the subject/programme reviews. Validation in the sense of evaluation for degree-awarding powers has been important for the quality enhancement of colleges.
- It is unclear what revisions (if any) will be made for the next six-year cycle. However, a not unlikely development is that institutions' autonomy will increase as they take over full responsibility for the quality of programmes and subjects, and that institutional reviews will again be the dominant form of review.

### **Students**

Students have had extensive rights in the Swedish HE system since the 1960's. Some of these rights are included in the HE Act and Ordinance. The current Act states that quality enhancement efforts "are a joint matter for staff and students and that students shall be entitled to influence education at HEIs." HEIs must support active student participation in efforts to further develop the education provided.

This is further specified in the Ordinance: "Students are entitled to be represented on all decision-making bodies and preparatory bodies whose activities are important to educational programmes and the students' situation." This means that they sit on university boards, faculty boards

and department boards, but also on committees preparing, for example, changes in curricula and examination procedures.

In the same vein students are always represented on review panels. They are always interviewed in the course of evaluations whether in audits or programme/subject reviews. Their role in the self-evaluation processes varies. The Agency is pushing for strong student participation, and/or for special student submissions.

The Agency Board includes two students of a total of 14 members, which gives them a role in the discussions on matters of principle concerning evaluations.

The development has taken place mainly because of strong student unions, particularly at the central national level. This is partly due to the fact that membership of a student union is compulsory by law. Student participation in university affairs is taken for granted and causes little or no debate. The only concern is the representativity or lack of representativity of the students involved. In Sweden, like in most other countries the proportion of students participating in student union elections is most often less than 10 per cent. There is also, from time to time, a discussion of the student's role as a peer.

### **Course evaluation**

The HE Ordinance specifies that all courses should be evaluated by students: "Institutions of higher education shall give students who are participating in or have completed a course an opportunity to present their experiences of and views on the course through a course evaluation to be arranged by the higher education institution

The institution shall collate the results of the course evaluations and release information about the results and any action occasioned by the course evaluation. The results shall be made available to the students."

How this is done is discussed in the programme/subject evaluation reports, and sometimes these reports also include remarks on the quality of teaching based on a reading of representative course evaluations. Teaching observation is not, however, a part of the subject reviews, and this is not likely to happen.

### **Summary**

- Students' rights, primarily in the field of co-determination, have developed gradually since the 1960's. Their strength is partly due to the fact that students union membership is compulsory by law. There is a political debate on that issue.
- Today, students have extensive rights in the field of quality enhancement, evaluation and decision-making. No major changes are envisaged.



- Students' rights in relation to course evaluations are regulated by the Higher Education Ordinance, and the regulation is accepted by institutions and departments. No major changes are envisaged.

## **Teaching staff**

The age structure of the teaching staff in higher education in Sweden is changing. It is estimated that almost 50 per cent of the staff will have to be replaced within the next fifteen years. At the same time the whole system has been undergoing considerable expansion. The number of students has almost doubled in the last 10 years and there has been no commensurate increase in the number of teaching staff. There will thus be a need for academic staff, especially in the humanities, law and social sciences. This will necessitate an expansion of postgraduate and doctoral training and, as a consequence special quality assurance measures to make sure that the quality of provision in these areas does not suffer. A recent projection shows that it is likely that there will be a sufficient number of new Ph.D.s to fill the necessary vacancies in other areas.

Quality assurance procedures regarding the appointment of teaching staff are regulated in the Higher Education Ordinance. The ultimate goal is that all teaching staff in higher education should have a Ph.D., but currently as many as 40 per cent of permanent staff do not have a doctorate. The situation varies considerably with the area of study. The underlying reason for the goal is, of course, the link of higher education studies with ongoing research. Ph.D. training is emphasised by the Government both with a view to improving the quality of higher education and to provide society with a more highly educated work force in strategic areas. This will require particular efforts over the coming years.

Appointments are usually made on a competitive basis and are thus advertised nationally and internationally. An expert committee with members external to the institution is established and submits its views to the competent body (appointment board) at the institution, who propose a candidate. The Vice-Chancellor makes the decision. There is also an appeals procedure. The quality of the process is assured and generally accepted, but the debate has focused on the fact that teaching qualifications are rarely taken into account sufficiently in decisions on appointments, promotions and in salary negotiations.

A few years ago the possibility of promotion, primarily from the rank of senior lecturer to professor, was introduced. It has turned out that this reform is successful in that the persons promoted are highly qualified

both scientifically and pedagogically. The drawback, which has been debated quite extensively, is that in most cases the promoted persons do not get the same working-conditions in terms of time for research, nor the same salary, as those appointed in competition with other candidates. The trade union has reacted strongly against this development and demands more resources in order to make it possible to provide the same conditions for professors who have been promoted as for those who have been appointed in competition with others.

### ***Evaluation of teaching***

As commented on above, teaching is evaluated by students in accordance with regulations in the Higher Education Ordinance. Teacher appraisal is not, however, a regular feature of subject and program evaluations by the National Agency.

In appointment or promotion procedures both research and teaching skills are evaluated. The Ordinance states: "As much attention shall be given to the assessment of teaching skills as to the assessment of other circumstances forming the basis for qualification [i.e. research and community service]." This assessment is usually based on a number of aspects, including quality of textbooks produced by the candidate, results of student evaluations, any prizes for teaching skills, participation in teacher training courses, responsibility for educational development projects, pedagogical leadership responsibilities etc. Recently the Ordinance was changed to include a provision on compulsory teacher training for anyone applying for a permanent university position.

The importance of teaching skills (defined broadly) has been the subject of much controversy over the past decades. It has been supported by students and in recent years by the Ministry of Education and Science. The major objections derive from various groups of academics.

### **Summary**

- In the near future there will be a substantial need for new teaching staff in the humanities, law and social sciences as a result of retirement and expansion of higher education. This will necessitate further expansion of postgraduate programmes in these areas, which in turn will require taking further steps in quality assurance of Ph.D. training.
- Teaching skills are assessed in appointment and promotion processes. In recent years the importance attached to teaching skills has increased and the debate on the feasibility and suitability of

making such assessments has become less vociferous, even if it has not ceased altogether.

## **Programmes**

The programme reviews at the national level have three main purposes:

*Control* that a minimum quality level is at hand with regard to prerequisites, processes and results/outcomes,

*Enhancement* through self-evaluation and observation and recommendations by peers,

*Information* to students, Government and the general public.

HEIs conduct more ad hoc internal evaluations besides the previously mentioned course evaluations. At present the national evaluation programme is of a magnitude that precludes major internal evaluation processes with the exception of following up results of national reports.

There is as yet very limited impact of the Bologna process except for the Diploma Supplement, which has been made compulsory, and participation in exchange programmes. Sweden is one of the countries where staff and student awareness of the changes envisaged is least developed. However, a Government White Paper is expected to propose changes in the degree system along Bologna lines.

Today, programmes are either professionally oriented or general. The overall framework of general programmes is provided in the Higher Education Ordinance. The structure and general contents of professional programmes are more clearly specified.

General programmes leading to bachelors and masters degrees are usually put together by the students, who choose the subjects to be included. There are overall regulations, specified in the Higher Education Ordinance, about the length and depth of studies of the major subject contained in the degree and about the size of the undergraduate thesis.

## **Approval and design of courses and programmes**

New courses and programmes are approved by Faculty Boards or equivalent bodies. There are no regulations concerning external validation or the participation of external experts on committees reviewing applications to establish new programmes leading to general degrees. Such a procedure is, however, not unusual at the colleges, which will often include an established expert from a university.

Any institution that wants to establish a new professional programme and many of the colleges that wish to introduce higher degrees must, however, obtain approval from the National Agency.

There has been a certain debate concerning evaluation and programme design, which has had to do with the risk of standardisation and of the negative effects of the Agency (or the peers) not accepting institutional autonomy in the development of innovations. It is a discussion mainly between some university departments and the Agency and is now less animated.

### **Summary**

- It seems a likely development that in the future higher education institutions will be given more responsibility for assessment at the programme and subject level. Such a development will change the role of the National Agency.
- The Bologna degree structure has not been introduced in Sweden. There is a review of the current structure and it is expected that it will lead to reforms along the path adopted by a great many countries in Europe now.

### **Conclusion**

The current emphasis of national evaluation of higher education in Sweden is on programmes and subjects at undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral levels. Students play a considerable role in this process, both as members of evaluation panels, as interviewees and as actors at the institutional and departmental levels. It is likely that at the end of the present six-year cycle a shift of emphasis may occur. The Bologna degree framework is now under consideration by the Government and will have to be considered in the development of a revised evaluation model.

### **Addendum: Areas of Commonality**

#### **Areas shared between Sweden, Hungary and the UK**

- Limited impact of the Bologna process so far (although in Hungary there are ongoing debates and in Sweden the government has plans for more substantial adaptation).
- It is now widely agreed in the UK that responsibility for quality and standards lies with the institutions themselves. It looks likely that Sweden and Hungary will move in the same direction. A likely shift in emphasis would then be from external to internal quality assurance.

#### **Areas shared between Sweden and Hungary**

- Accreditation of programmes (though on a much larger scale in Hungary)
- The quality assurance systems both include postgraduate provision and Ph.D. programmes

#### **Areas shared between Sweden and the UK**

- The shift in national quality assurance evaluations so far – although the development has gone from programme review to institutional audit in the UK and in Sweden the other way around. In both cases there has been an upheaval for the higher education systems
- The requirement for student information
- Validation for degree-awarding powers
- Debates along the lines of institutional autonomy and cost of external evaluation
- The rights of students in terms of representation on committees and in quality assurance processes. These rights are equally accepted.
- The importance attached to teaching skills in higher education.