

# Towards a Swedish Evaluation and Quality Assurance System in Higher Education

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During recent years, an evaluation movement has made itself felt in universities and other institutions of higher education. In Sweden, this has occurred somewhat later than, for example, in Great Britain, Holland and France but it must still be regarded as part of a European trend. In Sweden and several other countries, the focus of the questions posed in the evaluation process are a result of the decentralisation and deregulation of the public sector. However, the Swedish evaluation movement is not an accidental fashionable trend, but has its roots in a long-term process of change. During the 1970s, the first steps were taken to test a method in which self-evaluation and peer review were the main pillars. Evaluation models of this kind are now implemented in many institutions of higher education. However, it can be noted that Swedish evaluations have often suffered from a lack of data on the standards of learning achieved by the programmes concerned.

The historical perspective provides an explanation as to why the Swedish evaluation system is developing along different lines than those of the other Nordic countries. On one hand, there is already a tradition for local disciplinary or departmental evaluations with emphasis on quality development, while on the other hand a national system of programme review and institutional quality audit is still in its initial stage. Although a final system does not yet exist, it is possible to note a clear trend. A link between programme reviews, institutional evaluations and national evaluations has been created during the last few years. With time, this may form the breakthrough for a Swedish system with clear focus on quality development. The next few years will show if this direction is tenable.

This overview starts with a description of the national context, i.e. developments within higher education in Sweden over recent years. After that, we will discuss the starting-points for a Swedish evaluation system, and we conclude with an account of the present system.

## **The national context, some lines of development**

In contrast with many other countries, Sweden chose to meet the demands for expanding higher education of the 1960s and 70s by creating a new category of institutions which were to deal solely with undergraduate education and which did not receive any funding for research or post-graduate education. The gulf thus created between education and research was further widened by the financial system, with separate budgets for undergraduate education and for research and post-graduate education, and by the fact that certain teaching posts became purely educational while others were reserved for research and post-graduate education.

Peter Scott (1991) has described the Swedish situation as "a three-way split in the Swedish system". He continues:

"First, universities are pushed too far towards research, and colleges have to concentrate too narrowly on teaching (although some have been successful in attracting external research grants). If the latter were funded to carry out research, their budgets would more than double. Secondly, within universities there is a division between faculty boards, which manage research, and study programme committees, which handle the bulk of undergraduate education. The department gets squeezed in the middle. Finally, the academic profession is split into professors and other researchers, and lecturers responsible for teaching. Although

many professors do teach and most lecturers are involved in research, the division impoverishes undergraduate education. Professors should be academic leaders, not just researchers, and lecturers need more time to engage in scholarship if not front-line research."

The 1993 reforms of the higher education system have, in part, altered this situation. The institutions of higher education can now determine their own internal organisation (in general, comprehensive management bodies at faculty level have been created), all academic teachers should, in principle, carry out both teaching and research, and quite recently the state has accepted that permanent professorships should be allowed to be established at the smaller colleges of higher education. With time, it is likely that the difference between universities and regional colleges will diminish.

### ***Centralisation - decentralisation***

In a historical perspective, governance of Swedish universities and other institutions of higher education used to be extremely centralised in comparison with other countries. Professors have always been civil servants, and up till the 1960s even the number of secretaries and porters at each single department was decided by the Swedish Parliament.

Since then, considerable decentralisation has occurred. During the 1970s and 80s, a successive loosening of the state regulation of detailed aspects, primarily with regard to finance and employment, took place. The budget system which was introduced in 1977 meant greater freedom of action with regard to finance matters for institutions of higher education than for any other public authority. At the same time the first steps were taken to allow local study profiles, while numbers of study places at each institution still were decided at a national level. In these respects it was only around 1990 that a palpable decentralisation took place.

The Liberal-Conservative Government of the 1991-94 period had the express ambition of deregulating higher education. Its first proposition on higher education policy was given the characteristic title "Universities and Colleges of Higher Education - Freedom for Quality" (Prop 1992).

The deregulation meant, among other things, that the central authority for higher education - Universitets- och högskoleämbetet (UHÄ) - was done away with. For individual universities and colleges this meant being able to communicate directly with the Ministry of Education in the funding process without an intermediate authority.

The new Social Democratic Government which came to office in the autumn of 1994 appears to wish to return to an earlier view of the relationship between the institutions of higher education and the state. A number of previous structures now seem to be on the way back such as the re-establishment of a central authority of higher education - The National Agency for Higher Education (Högskoleverket) - which is to supervise the activities of universities and colleges.

### ***Dimensioning of higher education***

The "total dimensioning" of higher education which was introduced during the 1970s brought with it a stagnation in educational capacity. During the 1970s and 80s, the number of students in higher education remained largely unchanged. At the same time, the pressure on higher education increased, the number of applicants who could not be placed grew annually and it became increasingly common for young students to delay their studies in order to obtain work experience for which they were given extra credit by the admissions system. Political proposals that capacity should be increased were, however, consistently rejected by the (Social Democratic) Government of the day with reference to lack of resources.

The change of Government in 1991 brought with it a clear shift in direction in this regard. One part of the new Government's general policy on higher education and research was a sizeable increase in the number of student places. This trend has been continued by the Social Democratic Government which entered office in 1994. The number of active students ("full-time equivalents") increased from approximately 123,000 in 1983/84 to approximately 205,000 in 1993/94. The increase actually began in the academic year 1989/90.

### *Financing higher education*

In contrast to what has been the case in most other European countries, higher education and research in Sweden have enjoyed fairly favourable economic conditions over the past decades.

During the last decade (since 1984), the resources made available to universities and colleges of higher education have increased by almost a third. It is, however, external funding (research grants from external, public or private, sources) which has grown the most while the increase in direct public funding has been substantially less. Starting with the 1995/96 budget year, higher education and research will be subject to the same cutbacks which have affected other areas. The national budget presented in January 1995 implies an overall reduction of 10-15 per cent in the resources made available to universities and colleges of higher education over a three-year period. At the same time, demands for a continued growth of educational capacity remain. Higher education is expected to increase performance with fewer resources while maintaining or increasing quality.

## **Points of departure for evaluation in the Swedish higher education system**

### *Introducing the concept of evaluation*

The concept of evaluation of academic teaching was introduced by a national Commission on University Pedagogy in the 1960s. The Commission was appointed in 1965 with the rector of Uppsala University as its chairman and with a future university chancellor and a number of prominent representatives of business and professors of education as its members.

During the previous year, a new central authority (with the acronym UKÄ) had been established. In line with the tasks of this new office, the remit of the Commission was to "make proposals which may lead to a quality-optimal return on invested teaching resources" (UPU 1970). Evaluation was mainly defined as the testing and examination of students. When the Commission published its final report in 1970, universities had gone through a turbulent period. The Commission had found it "necessary to widen its scope of interest to include treatment of the evaluation of how the educational system works in general". How this was to be achieved was a matter which the Commission, outpaced by the events of the day, never managed to accomplish before it ran out of time.

The Minister of Education at the time, Olof Palme, had attempted to approach the problem the previous year using traditional Swedish methods of reform. By means of a comprehensive centralised regulation, the traditional unregulated studies in social sciences and humanities had been replaced by structured programmes. This reform sought to reduce the number of interruptions and cessations of studies and to improve the rate at which students completed their studies. Systematic evaluation came, therefore, to deal mainly with throughfare statistics. Following an initiative by the Ministry of Education a number of senior administrative officers were appointed at the universities with the task of following and explaining throughfare statistics at a local level.

These efforts, however, never resulted in a functioning system of evaluation. As Dahllöf (1969) had previously shown, the statistical data were inadequate and contained far too many sources of error. They did, however, form the basis for the follow-up system which now plays a decisive role in the allocation of resources. The main indicator of efficiency in education is still considered to be the rate of throughfare expressed in terms of "completed study years" in relation to the number of "full-time equivalents".

The report of the Commission on University Pedagogy (UPU 1970) contained a number of thoughts as to how quantitative throughfare data could be balanced by more qualitative data. Among these, the suggestion that some form of course evaluation be introduced was the most successful.

The Commission stated in its survey that approximately 150 departments throughout the country (i.e. a minority) already employed some form of student evaluation in their programmes. This figure grew quickly over the years that followed, partly due to the strong demands for student influence that were being expressed at that time. A pedagogical debate was also developing among university teachers, and this created an understanding for the conclusion that student experiences of their studies could form an

important element in evaluation. Twenty years later, the Higher Education Commission could report that course evaluations were used at 96 per cent of the departments at Uppsala University (SOU 1992).

### *Experiments with self-evaluation*

The 1977 higher education reform led to the first steps being taken toward a decentralisation of decision-making in higher education. As a consequence of this, questions of evaluation once again became current.

In addition to the national follow-up, the reorganised central authority, now with the acronym UHÄ, sought to stimulate local evaluation of activities. This implied a critical self-evaluation with regard to a particular activity within higher education. This was usually initiated and carried out by staff and students involved in the activity concerned. A number of successful pilot projects were carried out at departmental level.

A report on these projects from 1981 deals with a number of basic problems involved in the self regulation of the universities and colleges which have become crucial to the developments of the 1990s (Furumark 1981). The report concluded that it was necessary to go further by inviting external colleagues to participate in the evaluation process. The concept of peer review was introduced, and it was pointed out that it would be possible to achieve "the combination of internal detailed knowledge and external lack of bias which should provide the best prerequisite conditions for a truly illuminating analysis of activities" (Jonsson 1981).

In a report from a department at Umeå University it was shown how conventional course evaluations had, over the years, developed into a more problem-focused self-evaluation with most attention being paid to a total evaluation of the department's activities (Eriksson et al. 1981). The analysis was not limited to questions concerning the situation of the students and teaching but also involved matters of staffing and the utilisation of resources. The report is thus a document which tells how a programme review began to take shape within Swedish higher education already during the 1970s.

A corresponding report from Lund University showed that the evaluation of activities at departmental level was seen as an internal matter. Interpreting the results and considering the possible sanctions was the task of the department board. At the same time, however, evaluations were playing an important part in providing students and external professional representatives with an insight into the activities concerned: "Reporting and documentation are motivated more by the democratic decision-making process within higher education than by the duty to report to superior authorities. The supervisory function of evaluations should never be allowed to become the primary one" (Nilsson 1981).

Thus, departments were under no obligation to account for their activity evaluations to university administration. It was, however, possible to register needs and sanctions which could not be coped with within a department. These were then to be considered in the activity evaluation carried out at faculty and institutional levels.

In a later analysis of these trials Bauer (1994) has pointed out that this step up in organisation never worked:

"Although the projects provided interesting experiences, most of them were given up after some time, since the effort met with no interest whatever, neither from faculty level nor from the institutional leadership, and thus fulfilled no function in the system. In spite of that, this period of experimentation with and discussion about self-evaluation was a seed to the idea of self-regulation".

### *Standards of learning in higher education*

The traditional system of regulations for Swedish universities and colleges was designed to ensure a good and equal education at all institutions. Resources were, for example, allocated by way of an automatic system of funding which was meant to guarantee a good level of quality in each discipline. Even during the explosion in student numbers of the 1960s, departments were fed funds from a seemingly bottomless well for each new student who applied. On the other hand, no actual measures were taken to see that this system really resulted in good and equal results in education.

During the 1960s, the idea that the central administrative body should develop national tests along the same lines as those used within primary and secondary education was put forward in educational policy discussions. The Commission on University Pedagogy (UPU 1970) dismissed this idea saying that testing was the responsibility of the universities and colleges who could themselves decide to co-operate if they so wished. Trials were made using pooled tests and question databases in mathematics and certain medical disciplines but the idea did not achieve any great level of success.

In its 1992 report (SOU 1992), the Higher Education Commission repeated approximately the same suggestion. Both Commissions also dealt with the question of external examination. The Commissioners of the 1960s dismissed the proposal while the members of the Commission in the 1990s were of the opinion that external examinations were necessary to assure quality, and suggested that such a system should become an integrated part of Swedish higher education. There are, however, as yet only a few signs that this Commission has achieved more success in this regard than its predecessor.

In Denmark and Norway, such control functions have been firmly established by way of an external examination system with roots in the last century. This involves an external assessment of educational results. Experts from other universities, and in Denmark also from various professions, are thus able to check and determine the level of learning. This assessment system is also motivated from the point of view of legal security. By means of an external examiner's involvement, the individual student is felt to be less subject to the whims, sympathies and antipathies of his or her own teacher.

The Danish Centre of Evaluation has been built up and has moulded its activities within this tradition. External assessment is institutionalised from primary education right through higher education. Swedish higher education has no such tradition around which to construct an evaluation system. In Sweden, therefore, a somewhat different route is being followed than in neighbouring countries. This historical perspective also explains why the evaluations which have been carried out in recent years still have their weakest points in regard to assessment of, and data on, standards of student learning.

## **Evaluation for accounting and control**

It was only towards the end of the 1980s that quality assessment and accountability of higher education institutions became issues on the political agenda.

Clear signals for decentralisation were received from the Social Democratic Government of the time. The traditional emphasis on long-term, centralised planning was replaced by a new way of thinking whereby renewal and conceptual development were expected to be carried out at a local level. In one proposition to the Parliament the Government stated that "Our present system involves an altogether too high degree of detailed control from the Government and from Parliament which has meant that more emphasis has been placed on planning than on follow-up and evaluation" (Prop 1991).

The National Board of Universities and Colleges (UHÄ) was given new duties in line with this position. The responsibility of the Board for follow-up was, by this time, well established. Its accountancy function was now widened to encompass national evaluations of how well higher education met society's demands with regard to focus and scope, productivity and availability to various categories of students. The Government presented a model by way of two national evaluations of history and sociology which had been carried out in co-operation with the Swedish Council for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences. The plan was to evaluate more or less the whole range of higher education activities over a ten-year period.

During the 1980s, fears concerning the quality of higher education were expressed from various sources, not least by the student organisations. In 1989, the Minister of Education appointed a national Commission on Higher Education which had to examine the whole system of higher education with an emphasis on quality. Through this Commission the current European discussion on educational quality was brought to the fore even in Sweden. When the main report of the Commission ("Freedom, Responsibility, Competence - The State of Undergraduate Education) was published (SOU 1992), Sweden had elected a new, Liberal-Conservative Government.

The new Government continued along the established route but drew more radical conclusions, characterised to a large extent by "new-liberal" competitive and elitist thinking. Universities and colleges were to be given a freer position in their relation to the state. The central governing body was done away with and a national "Secretariat for Evaluation of Universities and Colleges" was established (which was later to assume the name Office of the Chancellor). In the initial guidelines for the secretariat from the Government, the supervisory function dominated. The most evident break with tradition was the duty of the secretariat to contribute "various indicators of quality which can be used as the basis for allocating funds for undergraduate education" (SFS 1992). It was, however, later found to be impossible to establish any general indicators of quality which could be used for making comparisons at a national level. Instead, each university and college of higher education was given the responsibility of establishing its own programme of quality development. A portion (five percent) of the resources of each institution was to be based on "an evaluation of each institution's programme for quality development and the implementation of this programme" (Prop 1994).

The Social Democratic Government which came to office after the 1994 elections immediately expressed the ambition to check these tendencies. A sign of this ambition has been the abolishment of the so-called quality premium. The Government pointed out that "quality enhancement is not simply something that is expressed in special programmes but is basically an attitude which must characterise the day-to-day work of each institution" (Prop 1995).

Other accountancy functions of the Chancellor's office remain. These include publishing evaluation reports that would enable the general public, students and decision makers to find out about differences between similar programmes and courses at different universities and colleges. A later addition has been the duty to annually present a comprehensive report to the Government on the quality of teaching and research at universities and colleges.

The supervisory functions also include assessing the rights of universities and colleges in presenting degrees and diplomas at various levels. With the help of expert advisors, criteria are established and applications for the right to present degrees are considered. These evaluations are then passed on to the Government - or from 1995/96 the new central authority (Högskoleverket) - which makes the final decision regarding the right of a university or college to present a particular type of degree or diploma.

This accreditation activity is something quite new in Sweden, where the traditional political perception was that all higher education should be - and is - equivalent, regardless of institution, and that quality was guaranteed by the political decision to establish a certain education.

So far, most assessments of this kind have dealt with Master's degrees in various subjects and with teaching diplomas for primary school teachers. A few private institutions have also been granted the right to confer degrees. These include three theological seminars of the free churches and an institute of musical pedagogy. According to the new higher education ordinance from 1993, the right to confer degrees is not granted once and for all but is subject to reconsideration. Thus after a few years, a new assessment of those institutions which have been granted the right to confer degrees and diplomas will take place.

## **Evaluation for quality development**

At the same time as the Government gave signals for decentralisation towards the end of the 1980s, initiatives were taken at local levels which meant a continued development of the previous trials of self-evaluation. Those early trials had been initiated by national authorities as an element in their responsibility for following up the higher education system. Now the focus was on evaluation as an element in the professional development of departments.

During these years, suggested models for local programme reviews were developed at Umeå, Lund and Gothenburg Universities. Franke-Wikberg (1992) and Nilsson (1992) have tested and published these models in revised form and have accounted for the experiences gained in applying the models within different faculties. The models display great similarities. They build on self-evaluation and peer review as central elements and both are intended to support quality development at a local level. The trials at Umeå

were inspired by the American tradition and by experiences from the University of California. The second model has its origins in the programme evaluation developed during the 1980s by the Association of Dutch Universities (VSNU).

As in Holland, the Swedish model has been used in several cases for evaluation in co-operation between similar programmes at different universities. It requires a careful planning of the evaluation procedure. Participants have, therefore, been successively introduced to the methodology of self-evaluation at various planning meetings. By way of discussions and agreements for joint timetables reached at the planning stage, realistic conditions for the procedure have been created.

In evaluations of single departments one can often notice weaknesses in this regard. Åsemar (1992) has stated in an overview of evaluations at Umeå University that such projects often needed more time for self-evaluation than planned. One reason for this was the low level of preparedness with regard to evaluations among the departments. He suggests that this be compensated for by way of preparatory staff training.

During the past few years a large number of programme evaluations have been carried out. The quality of these evaluations shows a clear relation to the way in which the self-evaluations are conducted. The models of analysis and description for self-evaluations have therefore been developed successively in connection with these trial runs. Nilsson and Kells (1995) have recently tried to summarise the experiences gained in these programme reviews in an advisory text.

So far, no systematic follow-up study of local programme evaluations has been published. However, in an international perspective it may be of value to note certain aspects of current Swedish praxis.

- At many departments, the preparedness to use a strategy of self-evaluation and peer review is low. The need for efficient preparatory training has therefore been frequently expressed. In their advisory text, Nilsson and Kells have suggested how such a training could be organised fairly inexpensively.
- Administrators at a local level have well-established routines for communicating data upwards through the system for purposes of national follow-up. Corresponding data for evaluations at departmental and programme levels are not usually available. Initially, self-evaluations have therefore often suffered from weak foundation data. However, this situation is currently changing as better and more user-friendly tools for accessing databases are becoming available.
- The Swedish models of analysis have contributed to self-evaluations which often display a high degree of systematic thinking and correspond to demands for a comprehensive overview. In an international comparison, there are a number of examples of high-quality self-evaluations.
- The trustful and well-informed dialogue between a department and the external review team is emphasised in the Swedish models. A routine praxis for the appointment of visiting teams has, however, not been established.
- There is an extensive interest in giving evaluations an international perspective. For linguistic reasons, departments are often forced to limit their nominations for external examiners to Nordic colleagues. Some departments have chosen to first carry out a Nordic peer review which is then summarised in another language. After about a year, one or more international colleagues are asked to carry out a follow-up evaluation.

The most important result of the work carried out over the past few years has been the emerging functional link between quality development at various levels within higher education. As the new Secretariat for Evaluation took shape, both its name (which became the Office of the Chancellor) and brief changed quickly. The duties shifted clearly from quality control to quality development. The office has initiated efforts to establish a Swedish system for quality assurance in line with the principles of decentralised

organisation of higher education. This is not a ready-made system but rather one that will be successively tested and revised. It includes both local programme reviews as well as national evaluations.

## **Programmes for quality development**

All Swedish universities and colleges are expected to develop their own programmes for quality development and to establish the necessary infrastructure to carry through all aspects of these programmes over a period of several years. Each institution's programme for quality development should be built around its own particular conditions, earlier experiences, local conditions, needs, priorities and ambitions. Each university and college should be able to organise its programme in its own way, choosing its own methods and solutions. This is a central principle in Swedish quality development and will therefore also apply in the evaluation of the programmes.

In addition to those aspects which are particular to individual institutions, there will also be certain common features and basic elements in the programmes:

A well-functioning programme for quality development can be expected to have its roots in the profile and traditions of individual institutions, and focus on step-by-step improvements based on local conditions rather than on comparisons with other institutions. It should be able to point out realistic possibilities for development which can cope with external assessment and examination by various interested parties.

It should include evaluation cycles of several years duration wherein all the most important aspects of activity are reviewed during each cycle. This review should make use of systematically collected evaluations by students, staff and consumers. The institution's own self-evaluation should be supported by a review by impartial external experts.

The quality development programme needs to be sufficiently financed to allow testing various improvements during the procedure. It should also be flexible enough to allow alterations imposed externally, e.g. resulting from governmental or Parliamentary decisions.

The central authority - The National Agency for Higher Education - (Högskoleverket) has a duty to see to it that the quality development programme and its implementation at an institution is reviewed regularly. It is thus not the quality of the education, but the efforts to improve quality that are assessed here.

For each institution a visiting committee with members with wide experience and competence is appointed by the National Agency to review that institution. The duty of this group is thus to judge the total quality development of the institution and not the activities of single faculties and departments. This is not an uncontroversial position but nevertheless necessary if one regards the above-summarised conclusions from self-evaluation trials during the 1970s and 1980s. Four pilot projects to test the conditions under which such reviews may be carried out have been run at the Universities of Stockholm and Linköping and at the Colleges of Luleå and Växjö. On the basis of these projects, routine evaluation of quality programmes will start during 1995/96.

Evaluations are to be carried out within a perspective of development and are therefore a contributing element in a learning process characterised by increased ambitions. They are intended to provide institutions with a qualified basis for improvements in quality development.

## **National evaluations**

The National Agency is also responsible for national evaluations with regard to quality levels within different disciplines, fields and programmes as well as within administration and other services. Such national evaluation projects may also apply to special pedagogical aspects or important problems within higher education.

The projects are intended to be carried out in three steps. First, material is collected and a self-evaluation is conducted within the activity concerned. After this, an external review takes place. An ambition is that this should involve international expertise. The third step will take the form of a follow-up after three to five years.

So far, only one national evaluation has been published, concerning studies in mathematics. It may be noted that this evaluation involved all kinds of courses; not only complete programmes leading to a degree. This will probably also be the case with other national disciplinary evaluations. Other national evaluations that have been initiated concern post-graduate studies in languages, medical training, primary school teacher training, and paramedical programmes at nursing colleges.

National evaluations may also come to include problems which reoccur in several evaluations, e.g. concerning mobility among academic teachers or tuition within post-graduate education. A study of forms of examinations in undergraduate studies is planned which will, among other things, deal with the problems outlined in the section on student learning above.

The National Agency will publish the results of national evaluations in order to disseminate information on results and local and national efforts to the general public and to decision makers. The main purpose, however, remains to provide universities and colleges with a qualified basis for their quality development efforts.

## **Prospects for future development**

A national system of evaluation of higher education in Sweden is still in a formative stage. Several institutions have adopted a model for local programme or departmental reviews, with self-evaluation and peer review as cardinal elements. These local efforts are basically geared towards internal quality development.

Beginning in the late 1980s, a political interest in national evaluations has also emerged, motivated by a rising awareness of the need for quality assurance in higher education. This is a common European phenomenon, which goes hand in hand with trends towards decentralisation and increased weight on the accountability of higher education.

On a national level, two or three parallel evaluation systems seem to be evolving. National programme and discipline reviews conducted or initiated by the National Agency will focus on the quality of education, while institutional reviews will aim towards an assessment of the "quality system" of a whole institution. A third type of evaluation on a national level, which involves a more explicit element of "quality control", is the accreditation process that is needed when an institution wants to establish a new type of degree.

It is still too early to judge with any certainty how these different elements will work together. However, as was pointed out in the introduction to this chapter, all these types of evaluations are linked together in the same organisational framework, and the development so far seems to indicate that with time they may form a coherent system with a focus on quality development.

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