

Specific government assignments to universities and other higher education institutions

– the Government's governance through design and follow-up

Summary and recommendations

There is a great shortage of labour in several occupational groups that are vital to society. The Government has tried to counter this shortage by giving the universities and other higher education institutions (HEIs) specific assignments to expand some education programmes for shortage occupations, primarily health sciences programmes, teacher and preschool teacher education and engineering programmes.

The Swedish National Audit Office (Swedish NAO) has audited the Government's governance of these assignments to HEIs. Our overall conclusion is that it has not contributed to any significant increase in the number of students or university graduates in shortage occupations: the expansion targets have not even been half met. The assignments are mostly clear and motivated by a labour shortage perspective. However, in the design, the Government has not taken sufficient account of the HEIs' ability and conditions to implement them. Nor has it made any comprehensive follow-up or analysis of effectiveness of the initiatives or informed the Riksdag of the outcome of these assignments.

Audit findings

In most cases, the assignments have referred to programmes where the primary problem for too few graduates is not an inadequate range of programmes offered by HEIs, but too few applicants, a limited range of places for internship or a shortage of teachers with doctoral degrees. This kind of assignments may be a relevant and effective measure in cases where there are many qualified applicants at the same time as the HEIs have a capacity to expand. However, for the programmes where there are structural obstacles, such as low application levels, the Government should consider other measures or another design for the assignments. One alternative is to invest more in ensuring the students already admitted complete the programme. This would lead to higher completion and ultimately an increased number of graduates.

Poor results in most programmes

The expansions have to some extent contributed to more highly qualified people in shortage occupations. Nevertheless, many HEIs have found it difficult to fulfil the Government's expansion targets. In the programmes covered by assignments in 2015-2017, the number of students starting the programmes has only increased by just over 2,100, instead of just over 4,800 beginners, which was the total expansion target for the assignments.

Greater consideration should be given to the ability of HEIs to carry out the assignments

The assignments are on the whole clearly designed. However, this does not apply to the assignment targeted to the programmes specializing in the built environment, which is unclear and poorly defined. During the last years, the Government has taken measures to clarify the content of the assignments and to some extent also facilitate expansions. However, the assignments have not been sufficiently adapted to the operational conditions of the HEIs. Other shortcomings that have had a negative impact on target fulfilment are that the assignments have been allocated at short notice and without any deeper dialogue with the HEIs. Nor has the Government Offices' preparatory work systematically taken into account relevant factors that are necessary to enable HEIs to implement expansions with good target fulfilment and high quality.

No analysis of effectiveness or appropriate reporting to the Riksdag

The Government has regularly monitored the progress of the expansion at the HEIs. However, it has not done any overall follow-up, analysis of effectiveness or evaluation of these initiatives at the total level. Thus, it is not possible to give an account and performance report of the expansions to the Riksdag.

Given that the Government, through these specific assignments, has deviated from its ordinary governance of the dimensioning of HEIs' educational offerings, and that the Government's general administrative policy focus is to reduce micro-management, the Government should, in the opinion of the Swedish NAO, evaluate and reconsider its initiatives more thoroughly.

Recommendations

Regarding the ongoing assignments, the Swedish NAO makes the following recommendations to the Government:

- Carry out a comprehensive analysis of effectiveness of the assignments and communicate this to the Riksdag.
- Clarify the assignments targeted to the built environment.

Should the Government consider allocating new similar assignments in the future, the Swedish NAO makes the following recommendations to the Government:

- Design the assignments with better consideration of conditions that may affect the ability of HEIs to carry out the assignments. This can be done, for example, through deeper dialogues with HEIs, more systematic analyses of conditions or by assigning broader assignments where HEIs themselves can choose shortage occupation programmes based on the HEI's capacity and circumstances.
- Apply time frames to the assignments that allow the HEIs to plan and prepare for delivering high quality assignments.
- Consider specifying targets for the number of degrees, to encourage HEIs to focus to a greater extent on completion and graduation rates.