



RIKSREVISIONEN
The Swedish National Audit Office

RiR 2008:19 Summary

High quality in higher education?

Summary

Riksrevisionen (the Swedish National Audit Office, SNAO) has examined the Government's actions to obtain knowledge of the quality of undergraduate (first-cycle) higher education. As part of its audit, the SNAO has carried out an empirical study of the quality of a number of undergraduate programmes and courses.

Since the 1993 reform to higher education in Sweden, universities (this term here covers all higher-education institutions, including university colleges) have had a great deal of discretion in determining the structure and content of programmes and courses. Over this period, the Swedish higher-education sector has expanded considerably. Today about 300,000 students are engaged in higher education to meet the needs of the labour market. The central government's related expenditures amount to SEK 22 billion per year.

The Riksdag (parliament) and Government have decided that Sweden should aim to be a leading player in the knowledge economy, with an education system characterised by high quality. The Higher Education Act lays down that universities are responsible for the quality of the programmes and courses they offer.

Shortcomings in how the Government obtains knowledge

The audit asked the following audit question: *Has the Government ensured the availability of knowledge about the quality of undergraduate higher education?* The SNAO has examined the Government's appropriation directions for universities as well as its appropriation directions and other instructions for the National Agency for Higher Education. This review shows that the reporting requirements imposed on universities have above all concerned quality management rather than the actual level of quality and its development. The Government has not exploited – either in its appropriation directions for the universities or in those for the Agency – the opportunity to highlight specific aspects of education for ongoing or regular follow-up. Further, the Government has only to a limited extent instructed the Agency to report on selected aspects of quality. The SNAO considers that the system for reporting to the Government on the quality of undergraduate higher education has thus not been designed to ensure the availability of knowledge about quality trends.

Reporting to the Riksdag is not sufficiently detailed

The audit asked the following audit question: *Has the Government's reporting to the Riksdag provided a comprehensive view of the quality of undergraduate higher education?* The SNAO's study shows that the picture of quality presented by the Government in its budget bills is not comprehensive. While a great deal of attention is devoted to the quality management of universities and the efforts in the field of quality assurance for which the National Agency for Higher Education is responsible, in-depth comments on the current quality situation are rare. For example, there is no information from empirical studies of links between education and research or the extent to which students achieve the objectives relating to the development of various skills that are laid down in the Higher Education Act. The information provided does not enable readers to form an idea of quality trends. Comparisons of quality from an international perspective are scarce. What is more, there is no presentation of the strengths and weaknesses of various Swedish higher-education programmes and courses.

The quality of programmes and courses varies ...

The audit question about the quality of education was worded as follows: 'Is undergraduate higher education of high quality?' The SNAO has carried out a study of educational quality in undergraduate higher education where 35 educational settings (departments or equivalent) at 22 universities were investigated in the framework of four case studies relating to biology, comparative literature, mechanical engineering (MSc programme) and economics. This study focused on the structure, orientation and implementation of the educational process and built on three types of empirical data: surveys of students, surveys of teachers and peer reviews by subject experts of student-performance assessment relating to key elements of the programmes or courses.

This quality study shows that higher education in the subjects investigated is of good quality throughout. Of the settings investigated, just under one-fourth can be categorised as 'high-quality' on the strength of good or very good scores for all three types of data. There are also examples among the educational settings investigated of results indicating shortcomings in the quality of education.

Students often give their programme or course good marks for quality but are less likely to consider that it has met expectations. Further, students in all subjects consider their teachers' academic skill to be high while they often fail to give them a 'passing grade' for their teaching skill.

Teachers at the educational settings investigated generally consider the quality of education to be high, usually higher than their students think. At no university do teachers give their own programme or course low marks. However, teachers see considerable shortcomings in their students' prior knowledge, in the resources available for teaching and in the amount of instruction.

Subject experts often evaluate the quality of performance assessment differently from both students and teachers. For each subject included in the study, one or several universities are at a high level throughout. There are also

settings whose courses have been deemed not to attain the standard that can be expected. However, both average and below-average educational settings exhibit many individual examples of high-quality performance assessment.

... but the findings do not point to shortcomings in quality

Taken together, the SNAO concludes that these findings do not give grounds for general concern about inadequate quality in Swedish higher education. However, nor do the findings prove that the undergraduate education provided is of high quality throughout. This would seem to indicate that the Riksdag's and the Government's objective for Swedish higher education to be of a high international standard has not been attained.

The study has identified high-quality settings both at older universities and specialised university colleges and at smaller higher-education institutions. The results thus do not support the hypothesis that the size of an educational setting (in terms of the number of students) would influence perceptions of quality. Another observation made is that the proportion of teachers with a doctoral degree does not seem to affect the students' or the teachers' evaluation of the quality of education.

From the peer reviews by subject experts of the quality of performance assessment, it emerged that courses given within the same educational setting may vary greatly in quality. There were also cases where a department was unable to provide documentation to underpin the evaluation of quality. The SNAO notes that uneven quality and a lack of documentation indicate that internal quality assurance is incomplete, which is likely to make follow-up and improvement efforts more difficult.

There remains a need to obtain knowledge of quality

The SNAO's audit illustrates that quality in higher education is a complex phenomenon which is hard to measure. Notwithstanding this, the issue of quality is so important in and of itself that the aim should always be to build knowledge of it on the basis of empirical information. Higher education is a strategic commitment on the part of the central government; it is very important both to individuals and to the national economy as a whole. What is more, higher education increasingly takes place on an international market where universities compete for the best students. It follows from this that the Riksdag and the Government should strive to obtain overall knowledge of the state of quality.

Any choice of what to investigate will at the same time highlight what is not investigated. Higher education covers so many aspects that no individual study can take account of them all. To obtain a full picture of the quality of higher education, outcomes of education need to be evaluated and related to students' prior knowledge and the resources available. Further, the complexity of the issue of quality makes it necessary to analyse it using a range of investigations and methods, from both national and international perspectives.

Recommendations of the SNAO

The SNAO recommends that the Government should improve its reporting to the Riksdag and strengthen the formation of knowledge of quality in higher education by:

- exploiting the opportunity to obtain, by means of the direction it exercises over individual universities and the National Agency for Higher Education, information enabling an integrated assessment to be made of key aspects of quality such as student learning outcomes or the extent to which course content is linked to research;
- ensuring that aspects related to outcomes and resources are included in evaluations; and
- initiating international comparisons of Swedish and foreign programmes and courses.