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The recruitment of international students to Swedish higher education institutions

Summary

The Swedish Higher Education Act states that among the aims of higher education institutions (HEIs) is the promotion of a better understanding of other countries and international relationships. In 2005 the Government laid down a national strategy for the internationalization of higher education, where one of the interim goals was to increase the number of international students. These are considered an asset in developing the quality of education and research at Swedish higher education institutions and international students can improve the international diversity. Increasing the recruitment of undergraduate international students is an important basis for recruitment to graduate education, research and work in Sweden.

The audit had the following audit question:

Has the Government and the higher education institutions directed, executed and followed up the recruitment of international students in accordance with the intentions and goals stated?

The report aims to illuminate the management, implementation and follow-up of the increased recruitment of international students and the consequences the increase entails. The report describes the way in which the increased recruitment may contribute to the fulfilment both of the provisions of the Higher Education Act and the intentions of the national strategy in terms of promoting the understanding of other countries and of international relationships.

During the academic year 2006/07, there were in total almost 28 000 international students in Sweden. Of these, almost 17 000 were free movers, whereas the rest were exchange students. There were indications that the increased recruitment of international students had entailed both new challenges and new strains on HEIs, the Swedish Agency for Higher Education Services and the Swedish Migration Board. At the same time, there had been scant follow-up how of increased recruitment of international students contributes to cultural understanding and quality within HEIs.

The Government is responsible for setting overall objectives, creating clear prerequisites for HEIs and monitoring the good use of resources at HEIs. The HEIs are responsible for the implementation of the Government's internationalization strategy.

In order to describe the work of the HEIs with regard to international students, Blekinge Institute of Technology, Dalarna University and KTH Royal Institute of Technology were selected. They were selected to show how work with international students is carried out at institutions of varying sizes

and approaches. Recruitment of international students also involves the Swedish Agency for Higher Education Services, the Swedish Migration Board and the Swedish embassies abroad. The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education also plays a role in relation to follow-up of the operation of HEIs.

Many applications and drop-outs place strain on administration

Admission to Swedish HEIs is carried out within a joint national admissions system that handles both Swedish application and applications based on foreign qualifications. However, foreign applications, has to be handled manually at all stages of the admissions procedure. This means that much time and resources are required in the handling. The assessment of the Swedish National Audit Office is that the increased recruitment of international students has entailed considerable extra work in the processes for admission and student residence permits. The increased work load carries a risk of negative effects on handling time and the proper assessment of applications.

A large proportion of the foreign applicants drop out during the admission process for various reasons. This means that a considerable number of the international applicants who are finally accepted for studies in Sweden for various reasons do not start the university education that they have been admitted to.

The Swedish National Audit Office notes that a coordinated admissions process for assessment of applications from international applicants has been built up by the HEIs and the Swedish Agency for Higher Education Services. The Swedish National Audit Office also finds that there is more work to be done in developing the processes for admission and student residence permits. The responsibility for analysing opportunities for further improvement of processes for admission and residence permits lies with the HEIs, the Swedish Agency for Higher Education Services and the Swedish Migration Board. The Swedish National Audit Office also finds that this is dependent upon the Government's decision about aims and scope for recruitment of international students. The Swedish National Audit Office notes that issues that relate to administrative procedures for admission and residence permits have not been considered in the Government's report to the Swedish Parliament.

Few encounters and variable language skills

The Higher Education Act and the national strategy for the internationalization of higher education state that HEIs shall promote the understanding for other countries and international relationships. Within the framework for its audit, the Swedish National Audit Office investigated three higher education institutions with the aim of illuminating the efforts made for international students. Findings show that the number of Swedish students on English-language Masters courses is small, and that it is difficult to bring about encounters between Swedish and international students in the teaching environment. Furthermore, difficulties may arise due to varying grasp of English among the international students. A lack of language skills is an obstacle to contacts both between different groups of international students and between international and Swedish students.

From the national strategy for internationalization of higher education follows that it is important that international students are offered lessons in Swedish. The audit findings from the three higher education institutions indicate that international students do not have the opportunity to follow

Swedish language lessons to a sufficient extent. This makes integration into Swedish society more difficult. The Swedish National Audit Office finds that a lack of language skills can constitute an obstacle for those students who are interested in working in Sweden and who could be an asset to the Swedish labour market. There is no regulatory framework that clarifies to what extent lessons in Swedish should be arranged and who is responsible for offering lessons in Swedish either to exchange students or to free movers.

Increased recruitment within the framework for the general resource allocation system

In accordance with the Government's interim goal in the national strategy for the internationalization of higher education, the number of international students at Swedish higher education institutions is increasing. The cost of teaching at higher education institutions is financed through the general system for allocating resources, which means that a HEI receives funding through at the framework with a ceiling amount at the rate students are registered and at the rate students complete course credits that are registered. Both Swedish and international students are financed within the system.¹

In situations with declining interest among Swedish students, not least natural sciences and technology, the resource allocation system may create incentives for the higher education institutions to increase the recruitment of international students. The total number of university entrants has been relatively constant for a number of years, despite a fall in the number of Swedish students. The volume has been maintained as a result of the increase in the number of international students. Therefore, the total resource input into higher education may have been greater than would have been the case if HEIs had been unable to compensate a declining interest from Swedish students with recruitment of international students.

The Swedish National Audit Office notes that the Government in conjunction with the national strategy for the internationalization of higher education did not report on the financial consequences of increased recruitment of international students to the Riksdag. It was assumed that the recruitment could be carried out within the framework of existing resources. According to the audit, the increased recruitment of international students has caused noticeable administrative consequences for the procedures for admission of students. It also emerges from the audit that the proportion of applicants who finally start studies at a Swedish higher education institution is relatively low – the dropout rate during the process is very large. The development has also affected the total use of resources within the education sector. An increasing proportion of resources for higher education are used for international students, both within the framework of the admission procedures and within higher education as such. The Swedish National Audit Office considers that the Government should give the Riksdag the opportunity to decide in which way Government funds should be used within the area.

Follow-up of operation and costs

The Government has not requested a follow-up in respect of how the recruitment of international students contributes to the intentions, or how the international students affect the operation and

¹ Following a recent decision in the Riksdag, this will change as of July 2011 when tuition fees will be introduced for international students coming from countries outside the European Union.

the financial prerequisites within the HEIs. Nor has the Government requested any special follow-up of the financial consequences that may be linked to the increased recruitment of international students.

The three higher education institutions had not carried out their own follow-up or analysis of how the operation had been influenced by the increased recruitment of international students over and above the overall reporting in accordance with their public service agreements.

The Swedish National Audit Office considers it to be very important to further analyse the way in which increased recruitment of international students explicitly contributes to the Government's intentions to promote cultural understanding. The Swedish National Audit Office also considers that further knowledge is needed, concerning for instance the priorities that are made in the operation and how these affect the quality of education, how the international students affect the teaching situation, access to lessons in Swedish and the opportunities for improving the exchanges with other students and with Swedish society. There is also a need for further knowledge about what happens to the international students after completion of their studies at the Swedish HEIs, and thus to what extent and in what way they constitute a recruitment basis for continued education, research and work in Sweden.

The Swedish National Audit Offices recommendations

The starting point for the audit is the provision of the Higher Education Act that higher education institutions in their operation should promote the understanding of other countries and international relationships. The reasons for increasing recruitment of international students are, among others, that the students can constitute an asset for the development and quality of the teaching and research environments, and that they can contribute to strengthening the international environment and diversity. With this in view, the Swedish National Audit Office makes the following recommendations to the Government:

- Follow up how recruitment of international students contributes to the goals of the Higher Education Act and the Government's intentions to promote cultural understanding, how the increased recruitment of international students affects the use of resources within higher education institutions and how the language skills of the international students affect their opportunities to benefit from the education.
- Consider measures for developing the processes for admission of international students so as to avoid as far as possible overloading the handling process.
- Clarify the responsibility for and scope of teaching Swedish to the international students at Swedish higher education institutions.
- Give the Riksdag the opportunity to consider the continued approach to and scope of the recruitment of international students to Swedish higher education institutions. In this documentation, the Government should also account for the financial consequences of the Government's proposal for approach and scope.

On the basis of the findings from the three higher education institutions, the Swedish National Audit Office recommends the following to HEIs:

- Continue the development work together with the Swedish Agency for Higher Education Services and the Swedish Migration Board relating to the administrative procedures for admission and student residence permits for international students.
- With consideration for current regulations, develop the follow-up of how the recruitment of international students affects the financial and operational prerequisites at the HEIs and how the recruitment contributes to the fulfilment of the provisions of the Higher Education Act and the Government's intentions for the internationalization of the higher education institutions.