



RIKSREVISIONEN
The Swedish National Audit Office

RiR 2009:28 Summary

Employability of university students -
Efforts made by the Government and individual
universities

Summary

Higher education represents a considerable financial investment both for individuals and for society. The Swedish central-government sector each year allocates about SEK 20 billion to first- and second-cycle higher education (roughly, bachelor's and master's degrees, respectively). One important reason for this spending is that a well-educated workforce is expected to contribute to a higher economic growth.

Just over 40,000 university graduates enter the labour market each year. For many of them, enhancing their employability in terms of better developmental and career opportunities in the world of work was probably an important part of their rationale for entering higher education. However, several surveys indicate that students and employers are often dissatisfied with the extent to which courses and degree programmes are adapted to conditions in the world of work. Statistics produced by the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education also show that there are significant differences in how graduates fare in the labour market depending on the programme or courses they completed and the university where they studied.

Riksrevisionen (the Swedish National Audit Office, SNAO) has examined the efforts to promote student employability made by the Government, individual universities (including university colleges) and the National Agency for Higher Education. The starting point of the SNAO's audit was the Higher Education Act, which stipulates that one aim of first- and second-cycle higher education is to develop students' preparedness to deal with changes in the world of work. The Bologna Process, where one of three overall objectives relates to student employability, was another starting point of the audit.

Four universities were specifically examined in the context of the audit: Kristianstad University College, the University College of Arts, Crafts and Design (*Konstfack*), Luleå University of Technology and Uppsala University. The respective case studies are presented in four separate reports. The audit also includes a questionnaire survey of all universities and a study of information relating to the labour market that is provided to future students. All six component reports (in Swedish) can be downloaded from the SNAO's website: www.riksrevisionen.se

The SNAO's conclusions

Links between education and the world of work are not ensured

The SNAO's audit shows that there are large differences between degree programmes in the extent to which the higher education provided is linked to the world of work and relevant to the labour market. Many programmes lack procedures to ensure links to the world of work. It is often up to the individual teacher in charge of a course or programme to decide whether and, if so, how course or programme components are to be linked to the world of work.

It emerges from the SNAO's case studies that certain degree programmes largely have no links at all to the world of work. At the same time, there are departments and programmes where systematic and conscious efforts are carried out to promote the employability of students. One important part of the explanation for the latter case, in the SNAO's opinion, is a strong interest and involvement on the part of heads of department and persons in charge of programmes, along with the existence of committed individuals who drive such efforts. Student unions and other student associations also play an important part.

The SNAO's questionnaire survey shows that all universities consider themselves to have a responsibility to promote the employability of their students, and that a majority of the universities also consider 'employability' to be an important and relevant concept in higher education.

Shortcomings in universities' internal follow-up of efforts made

It is clear from the SNAO's audit that many universities have drawn up overall objectives with a view to promoting the employability of their students. It also emerges, however, that it is rare for top university management to follow up how those objectives are implemented or how strong an impact they exert on operations. According to the SNAO's survey, three in four universities have overall objectives and strategies to promote student employability. Of those, however, only half follow up the actual work done at the university to achieve the employability objectives.

The SNAO's case studies show that it is rare for those responsible at various levels to entrust lower organisational levels with specific tasks or demand that they report back on their work to promote student employability. What is more, upward reporting in organisations on the work done is also of limited extent. In other words, universities' follow-up of their own efforts to promote student employability is not well developed.

The SNAO's survey shows that three in four universities follow up, at the central level, how well their former students have done after graduating. In addition, follow-up also takes place at the level of faculties and/or departments at several universities. Such alumni surveys, however, are a fairly new phenomenon. Moreover, they are rarely conducted in a systematic manner even though they can provide valuable input for decisions relating to the development, revision or termination of courses and programmes.

In the SNAO's opinion, this gives departments and course/programme managers considerable discretion in choosing how much priority should be given to the issue of student employability. Inadequate follow-up also entails a shortage of information that would allow universities to find out how various measures actually help promote student employability.

Students receive insufficient information about the labour market

The Government has emphasised that anyone who intends to enter higher education must be able to obtain high-quality information about the content of courses and programmes as well as about the associated labour-market prospects.

In the framework of its audit, the SNAO examined a selection of higher-education programmes as regards the labour-market information presented on university websites. This study shows that the range of labour-market information provided varies strongly between subject areas and between programmes. It is more common for universities to present information about the labour market to which a programme gives access than about existing contacts with the world of work or the skills that students will develop during the programme.

Employability has so far not been focused on in the evaluations of quality carried out by the National Agency for Higher Education

It is the duty of the National Agency for Higher Education to scrutinise the quality of higher education in Sweden. It emerges from the SNAO's survey of universities that most of them consider that student employability should be included among the topics addressed by the Agency's evaluations of quality.

So far, issues relating to the employability of students and the links between degree programmes and the world of work have not been focused on in those evaluations.

The Agency's proposal for a new quality-assurance system, which is at present being examined by the Government Offices, does give a prominent place to the issue of student employability. However, it is not clear from that proposal what criteria are to be used in the assessment of programme quality, for example as regards links to the world of work or student employability.

It is unclear whether the new course objectives support student employability

In conjunction with the implementation of the new study and degree structure for higher education on 1 January 2007, all universities revised their course and programme plans, introducing new course objectives for learning outcomes. Those objectives should indicate the knowledge, skills and abilities that students are expected to possess in order to pass their exams.

The process to introduce learning-outcome objectives at universities has involved extensive work being carried out under heavy time pressure. The teachers and managers interviewed by the SNAO stressed that much remains to be done before the objectives will be implemented. The students

interviewed also mentioned that there are deviations between learning-outcome objectives and course content.

In the SNAO's opinion, it is urgent to ensure that the issues of links to the world of work and relevance to the labour market influence the wording of learning-outcome objectives, given that those objectives are a key instrument of control over higher-education programmes.

Responsibility for guidance is unclear

Universities have a duty under the Higher Education Ordinance to give their students access to study and career guidance. The SNAO's audit shows that there is variation between universities in the guidance made available to students as regards future occupations and the labour market of the future. Part of the reason for this variation, in the SNAO's opinion, is that the Higher Education Ordinance allows different interpretations of universities' responsibility for guidance. This may, in turn, have a negative impact on the employability of students.

The SNAO's recommendations

The SNAO's recommendations for the Government

- The Government should instruct the National Agency for Higher Education to evaluate, in the light of the intentions behind the Higher Education Act, the extent to which the new learning-outcome objectives support efforts that promote student employability;
- The Government should instruct the National Agency for Higher Education to evaluate how universities handle their duty to engage in a dialogue with outside society on the content and extent (in terms of student numbers) of degree programmes and to ensure that their students have appropriate contacts with the outside world during their studies;
- The Government should instruct the National Agency for Higher Education to develop, jointly with the universities, an appropriate design for the labour-market information to be provided to prospective students;
- The Government should clarify the wording of the Higher Education Ordinance in relation to universities' responsibility for guidance both as regards studies and as regards students' occupations and future career in the labour market.

The SNAO's recommendations for the universities

- The universities should ensure, for each of their degree programmes, that it is considered how the issues of labour-market relevance and links to the world of work are to be taken into account in the education provided;
- The universities should develop the follow-up of their efforts to promote student employability, both in terms of what they do to promote the employability of their students and in terms of what former students think of the education and preparation for the world of work that they received;
- The universities should review the labour-market information they provide to prospective students and ensure that it is of high quality.

The SNAO's recommendations for the National Agency for Higher Education

- The National Agency for Higher Education, when evaluating degree programmes with a view to promoting student employability, should ensure that its quality-assurance system includes assessment criteria that concern links to the world of work;
- The National Agency for Higher Education should develop its exchange of knowledge and experience with universities about how recent graduates fare in the labour market.

