



Summary:

Lifelong learning in higher education

Audit background

The importance of a well-educated workforce for economic welfare is undisputed. Continuing professional development that leads to improvement of individuals' human capital may be highly significant for growth in a country and thus performs an important function for both society and individuals, as well as companies. The need for continuing professional development is further highlighted in a context in which individuals are expected to work at increasingly advanced ages. In light of a changeable labour market characterised by structural transformation and technical development, continuing professional development in higher education can play an important role in enabling individuals to maintain and develop the knowledge and skills needed throughout working life.

In this context the higher education establishments have an important role to play in offering a range of educational programmes that meet the needs of the labour market and students' continuing professional education demands. For the higher education establishments' offerings to be used by the target groups they must be relevant.

Purpose and delimitations

The purpose of the audit is to illustrate the extent to which there is a need and demand for continuing professional development in higher education, as well as to describe how the higher education establishments work to offer continuing professional development that meets this demand. The Swedish National Audit Office based its audit on the following questions:

1. What interest is there for continuing professional development in higher education among the social partners and people established in the labour market?
2. What is the higher education establishments' state of knowledge regarding the needs of the labour market and students' demand for continuing professional development in higher education?
3. How do the higher education establishments design their offerings of continuing professional development?

The audit only covers continuing professional development in higher education. The audit does not include the issue of financing continuing professional development, such as the optimum distribution of financing between individuals, employers and the public sector.

Audit findings

The overall assessment of the Swedish National Audit Office is that current central government governance of and the higher education establishments' continuing professional development work does not guarantee that supply corresponds to demand and the needs that exist among professionals and employers. The audit has shown that the higher education establishments find it difficult to identify demand for continuing professional development and knowledge of this demand is thus limited. Even in cases where there is an identified need, there is a lack of incentives and conditions for higher education establishments, employers and professionals to implement or participate in continuing professional development initiatives

1. Interest in continuing professional development has increased but there is no overall picture

The Swedish NAO can note that continuing professional development in higher education is a limited but important component for ensuring competency requirements, particularly for some occupational groups. Since the start of the 1990s, demand for higher education among professionals has increased. The number of professionally active students has increased by almost 200 per cent since the 1993/94 academic year, from 17 000 to about 50 000 in the 2013/14 academic year. The number of professionally active students has increased at a faster pace than the total number of students, implying that the proportion of professionals in higher education has increased.

Contract education, which allows employers to pay higher education institutions for customised continuing professional development initiatives, is not included in this information. Statistics Sweden does not collect data on contract education and such data is therefore not available in the University and Higher Education Register. However, the Riksdag has highlighted contract education as an important part of lifelong learning and stated that the higher education establishments should more actively offer this type of education. The Swedish NAO considers that improved access to statistics on contract education would give a fairer view of the higher education establishments' continuing

professional development efforts and contribute to better follow-up of contract education over time.

The Swedish NAO therefore recommends that the Government:

- Reviews the Ordinance concerning the Reporting of Higher Education Studies etc. (1993:1153) so that the University and Higher Education Register also includes data on contract education.

2. The work of higher education establishments to identify demand for continuing professional development can be improved

The higher education establishments have various methods to identify demand for continuing professional development. Their main tool is to measure the number of applicants to freestanding courses and programmes. This means that the demand not accommodated in the higher education establishments' existing range of educational programmes is not identified. Other tools for identifying demand, for example surveys among previous students, are used to a limited extent.

One condition enabling higher education establishments to identify demand for continuing professional development is effective collaboration between higher education establishments and working life. As regards educational programmes in health and medical care and with a pedagogical specialisation, collaboration has traditionally been good. This is partly because several occupations in these sectors have formal licensing requirements and the forms for collaboration in these educational programmes are regulated to a greater extent than in other programmes.

The fact that demand has long been restricted to a small number of public sector activities has also facilitated collaboration. In these areas of study there is also the largest proportion of professionally active students, which applies to both ordinary education and contract education.

In other areas it may be more difficult for universities and other higher education institutions to identify the need for continuing professional development, for example when actors in the labour market find it difficult to specify the type of continuing professional development they need for their employees. A further difficulty is when the higher education establishments meet fragmented demand from several small actors in the labour market.

The audit also confirms an earlier established view that the higher education establishments are not the main actor as regards supplying continuing professional

development to the private sector. This is partly because the continuing professional development that is often required by employers is company-specific, partly because employers do not consider that the higher education establishments meet their requirements for flexibility and availability. The higher education establishments' long lead times, combined with short time horizons of companies in competitive industries mean that commissioners go to other actors in the education market instead. This is most clearly noticeable in the natural sciences and technology, for example, where the proportion of professionally active students is considerably lower than in other areas.

3. Unclear remit and incentives affect supply of and demand for continuing professional development

The higher education institutions have a high degree of autonomy and to a great extent account for the dimensioning of the number of places in programmes. However, they have a responsibility to offer educational programmes that are attractive to professionals, both as regards content and form. A majority of the higher education establishments consider, however, that the remit is unclear. The higher education establishments require both clearer incentives and a clearer remit. Representatives of the social partners would also like to see a clarification of the role of the higher education establishments. The lack of clarity means partly that universities and other higher education institutions find it difficult to give priority to continuing professional development in their range of programmes, partly that representatives of the labour market do not see the higher education establishments as the main actor to turn to when a need for continuing professional development arises.

The Swedish NAO therefore recommends that the Government:

- Clarifies the role of the higher education establishments as regards provision of continuing professional development.

Traditionally *freestanding courses and distance freestanding courses* have been held up as ways of making continuing professional development possible for professionals. For some higher education establishments, above all higher education institutions and new universities, focusing on this type of education has been a strategy to attract students and has thus become a clear part of their profiling. Studies have shown, however, that the number of freestanding distance courses has decreased. The decrease has been explained partly by the design of the resource allocation system and the fact that the Government has emphasised that the higher education establishments must give priority to educational programmes that lead to a degree. This audit also shows that the design of the resource

allocation system entails negative incentives for the higher education establishments to offer continuing professional development in the form of freestanding courses. Resources are allocated to higher education establishments on the basis of student enrolment and performance, which is measured through the number of completed higher education credits. Since professionally active students earn higher education credits to a lesser extent than the average student, the higher education establishments risk not being compensated for performance when they offer continuing professional development.

However, the audit has shown that these courses are to a great extent used by other students than professionals. Consequently, it is not possible, on the basis of the Swedish NAO's definition of professionally active students, to say with certainty that a reduction in this type of course impairs accessibility to continuing professional development for professionals to the extent maintained by previous studies.

For some *professional programmes* that require a previous degree, the Government has augmented its governance by increasing the number of places. This applies in particular to shortage occupations in health and medical care and education. The governance seems to have brought some results, since the higher education establishments have increased their range of programmes and more students have been enrolled, though not enough to eliminate the labour shortage. At the same time there may be poor incentives for both employers and professionals to implement or participate in continuing professional development even in cases where there is an established need for continuing professional development. For employers a pressurised work situation or high competition level may prevent the initiation of a continuing professional development initiative. For professionals there may be no incentives to participate in continuing professional development since it is not certain that the programme will give any return in the form of higher salary or increased professional responsibility. The extent to which an increased number of places in education leads to more students ultimately depends on the students' interest in these programmes.

In many contexts *contract education* is held up as a successful form of education for continuing professional development. The higher education establishments perceive contract education as valuable, for example because it creates a meeting place between the academic world and working life. The extent of contract education has been relatively constant since 2007 and is used almost exclusively by public sector actors. The audit has shown that there are no clear incentives for the higher education establishments to implement contract education to any great extent. This is partly

because contract education requires considerable resources in the form of time and personnel, which are often tied up in education and research.

The Swedish NAO recommends that the Government:

- Review the incentive structures that may affect the opportunities of higher education establishments to offer continuing professional development.