
HOW DID THINGS TURN OUT?
The National Agency's Quality Audits and Evaluations 2001



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National Agency for Higher Education 2002

The National Agency for Higher Education is a central agency responsible for matters relating to institutions of higher education. Its tasks include quality assessments, supervision, reviews, development of higher education, research and analysis, evaluations of foreign education, and provision of study information.

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**The National Agency's Quality Audits
and Evaluations 2001**

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» Preface

The National Agency for Higher Education has now concluded the first year of evaluations within the framework of its new evaluation scheme. A large number of evaluations have been made. Many individuals – representing university departments, teachers, students, postgraduate students, assessors and the staff of the National Agency – have been involved in this work. Important results have been produced and also new knowledge.

This publication is partly the account that the Agency is required to submit to the government of its quality audits, partly a situation report on the progress made with the new quality evaluation scheme. Its contents have been discussed by the National Agency's Board.

The first section of the report presents an account of experiences from the most recent round of audits of the quality assurance processes at the higher education institutions. It comprises an analysis of the audits made during the period 1999–2001, an assessment of what progress in implementing quality assurance systems has been made at the higher education institutions

and discussion of the starting point for future audits of quality assurance endeavours at institutional level.

The second section of the report accounts for experiences of how the methodology and processes adopted for the evaluation of subjects and programmes have functioned and presents the findings of these evaluations. The methodological sections are important as they contain observations that will be significant for the future development of evaluations. The report concludes with an analysis of the circumstances which the National Agency would like to draw to the attention of the government.



Sigbrit Franke

The University Chancellor

» Summary

This report presents an analytical summary of the National Agency's audits of quality assurance at institutional level and the first year of evaluations of subjects and programmes in the new quality evaluation scheme. A great deal of interest has been shown in this new scheme in both Sweden and other countries. A large number of study visits have been made to the Agency and the Agency's staff have participated in a number of international conferences.

It transpires, half way through the second round of quality assurance audits at the higher education institutions, that many institutions are still in the introductory phases of quality assurance implementation. In spite of this, they have all, with only a few exceptions, made considerable progress and developments are positive. However, many higher education institutions still do not have functioning feedback system and cannot therefore point to any real outcome from their endeavours.

A large number of evaluations, totalling 222 and covering the subjects of computer science, business administration, classical languages, linguistics, media and communication studies, economics, Swedish and Scandinavian languages, mathematics and theology have been conducted and have involved the participation of 101 assessors. The evaluation reports contain a

number of proposed improvements that either concern the subjects in general or individual institutions. A number of examples of approaches that are particularly effective have been highlighted. It is gratifying to note that few of the programmes evaluated have displayed shortcomings serious enough to justify severe criticism or to jeopardise the right to award degrees.

One recurrent observation concerns the workloads of teaching staff and the consequent reduction in the time available for their own research and skill enhancement, or even its total disappearance. Demands are still generally being made for increased financial resources, even though in some cases it is indicated that this question should be related to the strategic considerations made by some higher education institutions or that, alternatively, it should be ascertained at a political level whether the current system of allocating funds has the desired results.

A number of subjects offer very low volume programmes with few students and few teachers. Several subjects find it difficult to recruit new students. In the majority of subjects, except for business administration, there are large numbers of students taking first and second semester undergraduate programmes, but in subsequent semesters these numbers decline considerably.

The terms on which postgraduate programmes are offered and planned vary greatly from subject to subject and also within subjects. The majority of postgraduate programmes can be characterised as low volume courses. Proposed methods of improving this situation involve profiling, cooperation and concentration.

Student influence has been formally incorporated into the organisation at most institutions so that it functions. Course evaluations are conducted with greater or lesser intensity in all the programmes at undergraduate level. The situation is not as encouraging, however, when it comes to communicating the results to students and initiating the necessary improvements.

Gender inequality still prevails and little is being

done to improve the situation in the subjects traditionally dominated by men such as theology and economics. The opposite applies to Swedish and Scandinavian languages, where women dominate at both undergraduate and postgraduate level and to some extent among teaching staff.

Finally, it can be determined that despite their difference in focus and the different assessors involved, both quality assurance audits and evaluations of subjects and programmes present similar findings. This applies, for instance, to the management of course evaluations and criticism of governance and organisational structures. The issue of internationalisation attracts only little attention.

» Quality audits during the period 1999–2001

Background

In 1999, a second round of audits of quality assurance procedures at higher education institutions in Sweden began. On the whole, these follow-up audits have three main purposes. To begin with, they are intended to monitor the *recommendations* made in the audit reports from the first round (1995–1998). Secondly, they aim to investigate how much progress has been made at the higher education institutions in developing systems for *self-regulation*. And thirdly there is a desire to assess the extent of the impact of quality assurance measures in the higher education institutions on their organisations as a whole. At the end of 2001, half of this second round had been completed and comprised 17 institutions¹. The follow-up audits of the remaining higher education institutions have started and will be concluded during 2002. In addition, appraisal of the quality assurance procedures of a number of institutions is taking place for the first time².

This report presents the audits of the quality assurance procedures that higher education institutions are

obliged to conduct in order to develop their activities. It is mainly based on the evaluations of the 17 higher education institutions that have been the subject of the second round of quality assurance audits. In it we attempt to account for the following aspects of this work:

- **Methodological:** The consequences of the changes affecting implementation of the audits in preparation for the second round.
- **Conclusions:** What stage of development have the quality assurance procedures of the higher education institutions attained?
- **The future:** Proposals concerning future work in auditing the quality assurance procedures of the higher education institutions.

In addition to the 17 audits referred to above, this appraisal is also based on the previous follow-up of the first round of the National Agency's audits – *Quality evaluation procedures – one way of improving the quality of programmes offered by higher education institutions?*

¹ University College of Borås, University College of Gävle, University College of Jönköping, Blekinge Institute of Technology, Stockholm University College of Opera, Mälardalen University College, The Royal University College of Music in Stockholm, University College of Skövde, University College of Kristianstad, University College of Kalmar, University College of Trollhättan/Uddevalla, Karolinska Institute, Stockholm University, Lund University, Uppsala University, Örebro University and Karlstad University (For the reports see *References*).

² University College of Malmö, University College of Gotland, University College of Södertörn and University College of Music Education in Stockholm.

and *Determination, diagnosis, dialogue? A study of the National Agency's evaluation and assessment reports 1995–1998*³. The responses to the questionnaire sent to the 17 higher education institutions in preparation for this report have also formed part of the material on which it is based.

Method

Two versions of evaluation

The methods used for these audits are somewhat simplified compared to the first round. The institutions have been given a choice of two versions. One of them involves a self-evaluation that focuses on the three intentions referred to above (see *Background*). A group of assessors with at least one participant from the first round, a representative of the labour market and a student representative have conducted a site visit to the institution and drawn up a report. Twenty-two institutions opted for the version including a site visit⁴.

In the second version several (two–four) higher education institutions are grouped together. They each make their own self-evaluation which is reviewed by a group of assessors. This group consists of participants in the first evaluation of the institution concerned. There is no site visit, but on the other hand a brief meeting takes place with the senior administrators to discuss any ambiguities and to acquire supplementary information. The audits of the group of institutions are combined to produce one report. These groupings have been based on the time at which the institutions have requested the audit to take place and not on any attempt to determine similarities. Seventeen institutions opted for this version⁵.

In the reports on the institutions that opted for the version with no site visit, the assessors have pointed out that the lack of this visit has reduced their possibilities of making a fair assessment. Interviews with the chairpersons of the groups of assessors have revealed

³ *Kvalitetsarbete – ett sätt att förbättra verksamhetens kvalitet vid universitet och högskolor? Halvtidsrapport för granskningen av kvalitetsarbetet vid universitet och högskolor* (Högskoleverkets rapportserie 1997:41 R) and Stensaker, B., *Dom, diagnose, dialog? En studie av Högskoleverkets gransknings- och bedømmerrapporter 1995–1998* (Högskoleverkets skriftserie 1999:5 S).

⁴ University College of Borås, University College of Gävle, University College of Jönköping, Blekinge Institute of Technology, Stockholm Institute of Education, Stockholm University College of Opera, University College of Music Education in Stockholm, Lund University, Uppsala University, University College of Dance, University College of Södertörn, University College of Halmstad, University College of Skövde, University College of Malmö, University College Kristianstad, Stockholm University College of Acting, University College of Gotland, University College of Arts, Crafts and Design, Linköping University, Mid-Sweden University College, Umeå University and Växjö University.

⁵ Mälardalen University College, Royal University College of Music in Stockholm, Örebro University, Karlstad University, University College of Kalmar, University College of Trollhättan/Uddevalla, Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm University, Chalmers Institute of Technology, Royal Institute of Technology, Gothenburg University, Stockholm University College of Physical Education and Sports, Luleå Technological University, University College of Dalarna, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, University College of Film, Radio, Television and Theatre, and Royal University College of Fine Arts.

that they consider that the brief meetings with senior administrators cannot in any way replace site visits. They point out, however, that these discussions have led to greater understanding than the written material on its own can provide.

Opinions differ among the institutions that have opted not to have a site visit. Some consider that this simplified model is more than adequate, as the National Agency is now conducting extensive evaluations of subjects and programmes. Others claim that it is unsatisfactory not to be able to present a more penetrating description of quality assurance methods. This issue is discussed in more depth in the section headed *The Future*.

Self-evaluations

The institutions consider that the work involved in self-evaluation has been the most important aspect of the process. This applies to both types of audit. It has taken up a great deal of time, far too much in the opinion of some, but provided greater understanding of quality development and in some cases regular self-evaluation has become part of the internal quality assurance process.

The simplification of the auditing process that was to characterise the second round has resulted in self-evaluations that are generally speaking less well grounded within the institutional organisations. In many cases they have merely reflected the views of senior administrators. This applies both to evaluations with a site visit

and those without. This shortcoming was considered unsatisfactory by the groups of assessors, in particular those that did not conduct site visits.

The groups of assessors

The groups of assessors in this round were, as in the first round, composed of individuals in senior positions in higher education institutions, representatives of the labour market and students. The table below shows how these groups were represented and also their distribution by gender.

Table 1: The composition of the groups of assessors.

	Representatives of higher education institutions		Representatives of the labour market		Student representatives	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Number of assessors	26	21	16	1	9	9

Source: The National Agency reports on renewed assessments and evaluations of quality assurance procedures 1999—2001.

Of the 47 representatives for higher education institutions, 27 are currently or have been Vice-Chancellors or Deputy Vice-Chancellors, 8 are professors and 12 lecturers with administrative posts (chairmen, directors of studies) or key figures in institutional governance (responsible for quality assurance, heads of units). This demonstrates that a considerable proportion of the current or former senior administrators within the higher

education institutions have been involved. As a result the learning process is almost certainly twofold; it affects both the institution being audited and the individuals involved in the audit, who are able to benefit from the experiences they gain in their own everyday activities. Unlike the evaluations of subjects and programmes, these audits involve few individuals from outside Sweden. All in all, five assessors come from Norway, Denmark and Finland.

Men form a clear majority in the groups as a whole (51 men and 31 women), but this is mainly due to the difficulties of recruiting women to represent the labour market. Where representatives of the higher education institutions and students are concerned there is an even gender balance.

Conclusions

The first round of audits

The National Agency arranged two appraisals of the first round of audits: one in 1997 when half had been completed⁶, and the other in 1999 when an external assessment was made of all the reports published from 1995 to 1998⁷. These appraisals summarise for instance the recommendations made by the groups of assessors and note that most of them apply to governance and to the organisation of quality assurance measures.

The reports show that students and teachers are committed to working for quality assurance at departmental level in many places but that explicit quality assurance processes at institutional level were often lacking. In only a few cases was the work of an institution related to overarching visions, goals and strategies for the development of its activities. Evaluation and feedback systems were not infrequently characterised by shortcomings with regard to systematisation, continuity and the extent to which they applied. As a rule there was no link between operational and financial review.

The audits established that quality assurance procedures were still in the process of being launched at most places, which gave rise to a dual problem – the institutions were not used to analysing quality assessment measures, nor did they have a great deal to analyse.

The overall conclusion of the audits is that the culture of the Swedish higher education institutions is moving towards “The good higher education institution”, but that there is still a long way to go before systematic, communicable quality assurance measures that apply to every operation prevail.⁸

How much progress have the higher education institutions made?

The structure of systematic quality assurance proce-

⁶ *Kvalitetsarbete – ett sätt att förbättra verksamhetens kvalitet vid universitet och högskolor?*

⁷ Stensaker, B., *Dom, diagnose, dialog?*

⁸ *Kvalitetsarbete – ett sätt att förbättra verksamhetens kvalitet vid universitet och högskolor?* p. 10.

dures can be described in simple terms as consisting of four supervening stages:⁹

- **Planning:** Formulating goals and strategies for quality assurance measures.
- **Implementation:** Activities to attain these goals.
- **Follow-up/evaluation:** The outcome of these activities and assessment of the results.
- **Improvements:** Measures prompted by the results.

Only when all these components are in place can a higher education institution be considered to have acquired the self-regulating quality assurance procedures that will enable adequate assessment of its operations for effective governance. During the first round of audits, most of the institutions were still working on the formulation of goals, a few with activities and one or two had combined all four stages. What is the situation today? Are higher education institutions in Sweden attaining the self-regulating quality assurance systems required of them? Now that half of the second round of audits has been completed the reports present a somewhat fragmented view. The higher education institutions can be roughly divided up as follows:

Table 2: The development of the higher education institutions towards self-regulating quality assessment procedures.

	Planning	Implemen- tation	Follow-up/ evaluation	Improve- ments
Number of institutions	4	5	5	3

Even though at first sight this table may be somewhat disheartening, with more than half of the institutions evaluated still considered to have only the first two stages of a quality assessment structure in place, the reports reveal that virtually all of them – with one or two exceptions – have made significant progress and developed positively since the previous round of audits. This also applies to the institutions that are in the planning phase today but which during the first round could point to no real quality assurance processes at all.

Several higher education institutions are well into the implementation phase and can be described as in the process of defining feasible patterns and establishing support for the strategies they have adopted and that more and more levels within the institution are involved in their quality procedures. However, many institutions have not yet established any functioning feedback systems and cannot therefore indicate any real results from their endeavours. But an equal number of institutions have made more progress and are now working on the development of functional systems for reviewing the

⁹ Deming, W. E., *The New Economics for Industry, Government, Education* (MIT Press).

results that their efforts have produced and analysis of what these results mean for their future activities. Several have determined ways of providing feedback between the various levels and are contemplating how the input this provides can best be used.

Quality assurance measures at three of the seventeen institutions evaluated is characterised as impressive. Two of these institutions are university colleges and one is a new university. They have developed a system with explicit mission statements, a clear division of responsibilities between different levels and feedback between these levels. They do not regard quality assurance as an isolated process, distinct from other forms of operational planning, but have succeeded in integrating it in a natural manner. Some of these good results may be attributed to an energetic administration and/or that they have central executives who have been responsible for quality assurance for many years and who have been able to build up reserves of trust, good contacts and expertise in this area. At these institutions quality assurance measures have gained greater adherence at departmental level than is the case at other higher education institutions. One of the institutions has also invested in academic management and been able to take advantage of this to bring about major changes.

At one or two institutions quality assurance measures seem to have stagnated completely as a result of other priorities, extensive reorganisation or internal divisions.

What do the recommendations say?

One way of gaining some indication of the impact of quality assurance, which was also used in the first round of audits, is to study the recommendations made in the reports in various fields and also how many or how large a proportion there are. The following section contains a presentation of a number of observations and comparisons on the basis of the recommendations made in the first and second round of audits. As only half of the second round have been completed these observations should primarily be seen as reflecting trends rather than final results.

In the first round it can be established that a preponderance of recommendations concerned plans to organise and draw up objectives for quality assurance and the role of governance. Stensaker explains this outcome as follows:

As the auditing process has adopted an institutional perspective in its assessments, this result should not, however, come as any surprise. Objectives, governance, management and organisation often become the central variables when an organisation is evaluated from a more holistic point of view.¹⁰

This outcome would also appear reasonably natural given that the requirement of a quality assurance programme and systematic quality development programmes for entire higher education institutions was of relatively recent date. At the time of the first round

¹⁰ Stensaker, B., *Dom, diagnose, dialog?*, p. 39.

of audits, most of the institutions were in the initial stages of their quality assurance work, and this centred mainly on drawing up mission statements and determining where responsibilities lay.

Governance, organisation, objectives and strategies also seem to be the subject of many of the recommendations made in the second round of audits as well. It is, however, interesting to note that recommendations of this type are somewhat fewer in number and have given way to proposals relating to the systems at the higher education institutions or evaluation/follow-up, particularly course evaluations by students. There is frequent discussion of these course evaluations and the way in which they are (not) followed up even if this is not referred to in the recommendations. There has also been an increase in the number of recommendations concerning the participation of staff or students in quality assurance measures, which also focus on student participation to a great extent.¹¹

Does the increase in the number of recommendations of this type mean that the higher education institutions have become worse since the last round at evaluations and follow-up and at involving students in the quality assurance process? It would be more reasonable to see the increase in attention to this issue as evidence that quality assurance procedures are being implemented at

many institutions, and that central components in this phase are increased participation and support as well as the establishment of follow-up and evaluation systems. Yet another explanation might be that the assessors have been influenced by the debate in higher education that followed the publication of the government bill *Studentinflytande och kvalitetsutveckling i högskolan* [*Student influence and quality development in higher education*]¹². Course evaluations and student influence are important requirements in this bill.

Relatively few of the recommendations made during the first round concerned gender equality measures and internationalisation and they are even less apparent now. There are probably a number of reasons for this. One is that the simplification of the second round of audits, which consisted mainly of focusing on the institutions' systems for self-regulation, excluded aspects such as gender equality and internationalisation from the general framework. Stensaker presents a corresponding interpretation in his analysis of the first round of audits:

Another possible explanation could be that the assessors quite simply did not consider these areas [internationalisation, gender equality, and working environment] relevant themes in relationship to quality assurance.¹³

Gender equality was also – together with student

¹¹ The Swedish National Union of Students (SFS) has produced a report that contains an analysis of student influence in quality assurance evaluations (see *References*).

¹² Government bill *Studentinflytande och kvalitetsutveckling i högskolan* (Bill 1999/2000:28)

¹³ Stensaker, B., *Dom, diagnose, dialog?*, p. 39.

influence and cultural diversity – one of the themes evaluated specifically in connection with the national evaluation of specific aspects of quality in 1999, which may also be one of the factors contributing to the way in which it was toned down in the quality assurance auditing processes.¹⁴

One important observation is that the recommendations that deal with areas other than quality assurance have also increased in relationship to the first round. Analysis of the reports reveals that they can concern, for instance, IT, the link between research and teaching, institutional use of resources, the choice of profile and research areas, etc. The relative increase in recommendations of this type shows that the institutions have availed themselves of the opportunity to determine the areas on which evaluation should focus.¹⁵

In sum, it would appear that issues relating to organisation and objectives have become clearer, whereas what is still largely lacking is a system to enable feedback, follow-up and evaluation. These observations agree well with the comments presented in the section *How much progress has been made at the higher education institutions?*

The future

What form should future audits of quality assurance procedures take?

Analysis of the quality assurance processes at higher education institutions shows that developments have taken place during the six years in which audits have been made. Several institutions are described as ambitious, some are even accounted impressive and almost all of them have improved since the first round. On the other hand it can be determined that more than half of the institutions audited are still in the planning and implementation phase where quality assurance is concerned. In other words, only a few have a fully developed system today.

The higher education institutions have claimed in various contexts that their internal quality assurance procedures and the National Agency's audits have made a major contribution to this development. A number have expressed the view that the assessors can be regarded as qualified consultants who have been of great benefit in the process of internal development. The audits of quality assurance procedures have, however,

¹⁴ See *Lärosätenas arbete med jämställdhet, studentinflytande samt social och etnisk mångfald* [How higher education institutions work with gender equality, student influence and social and ethnic diversity] (Högskoleverkets rapportserie 2000:8 R) and *Goda exempel. Hur universitet och högskolor kan arbeta med jämställdhet, studentinflytande samt social och etnisk mångfald* [Good examples. How higher education institutions can work with gender equality, student influence and social and ethnic diversity] (Högskoleverkets rapportserie 2000:9 R).

¹⁵ Another area was institutional libraries. The National Agency has commissioned a report based on the evaluation reports of the function, status and position of these libraries. This report deals with local and national quality measures in this field. Gellerstam, G., *Kvalitetsutveckling och kvalitetsmodeller för högskolans bibliotek. En förstudie* [Quality development and quality models for higher education libraries. A pilot study.] (Högskoleverkets rapportserie 2002:6 R).

involved extensive work for a great many people, and not least their relative frequency has been a problem. There are therefore good reasons for considering how continued auditing of quality assurance procedures can be carried out to provide the authorities with information about how this work is being undertaken and what results it has. At the same time the audits must take into account the needs and circumstances of the higher education institutions.

The government bill 1999/2000:28 and the institutions' budget documents for 2002 contain a statement of the government's intention with regard to future audits and the accountability of the higher education institutions for their quality assurance procedures:

The audits conducted by the National Agency of the quality assurance measures at the institutions have functioned well and are also to be conducted in the future [...] future assessment of quality assurance measures can be simplified.¹⁶

It is the government's intention to require every fourth year, beginning with the presentation of the annual report for the fiscal year 2004, a specific account of the work undertaken by the higher education institutions to assure and develop the quality of programmes and research.¹⁷

In accordance with the intentions of the government, the National Agency proposes that the higher education institutions should submit a written analysis/account

of their quality assurance procedures every fourth year – starting in 2004. It will be the task of the National Agency to compile and assess these written reports. This system presupposes that the analysis submitted will be somewhat more extensive than is currently the case in the institution's annual reports, and that the National Agency will determine what aspects are to be dealt with. It also requires agreement between the National Agency and the government that the Agency rather than the government is to require information about quality assurance measures. In order to simplify the administrative burden for the National Agency, the higher education institutions should be divided into four groups, the first to submit reports during 2004, the second during 2005 and so on. This would mean requiring each institution to submit a report every fourth year. In addition to this, the National Agency is prepared to assist the institutions according to their varying needs and desires.

The material on which the National Agency can base future audits and presentations of the quality assurance procedures of the higher education institutions can be supplemented by information taken from the national evaluations of subjects and programmes, national questionnaire surveys initiated by the Agency itself (student and teacher surveys, see the section headed *Student Mirror*) and other possible inquiries.

¹⁶ Government bill *Studentinflytande och kvalitetsutveckling i högskolan* (Bill 1999/2000:28), p. 17.

¹⁷ Budget documents for the fiscal year 2002 concerning funding for higher education institutions, etc. p. 3.

» Evaluations of subjects and programmes 2001

Background

The National Agency has been instructed by the government to evaluate all programmes leading to the award of degrees or vocational degrees once every six years.¹⁸ These evaluations are to comprise both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. The following section accounts for experiences from the new quality evaluation scheme. To begin with experiences from the evaluation process will be accounted for, thereafter the findings and the outcome of the evaluations. Finally there is a discussion of circumstances to which the National Agency desires to draw the government's attention.

The evaluation process

Aim and evaluation models

Fundamentally these evaluations have three aims:

1. To contribute to a department or equivalent subject provider's own quality development.
2. To assess whether the programme complies with the objectives and regulations laid down in the Higher Education Act and Higher Education Ordinance (which includes review of the right to award degrees).
3. To provide information for students, for instance, about to choose a programme.

The evaluation model used by the National Agency consists of three sections: a self-evaluation conducted by the higher education institution, external assessment and follow-up. The evaluation focuses on the programme or department's circumstances, implementation and results.

A number of quality criteria based on the Higher Education Act and the Higher Education Ordinance have been formulated in collaboration with the higher education institutions. These include, for instance, teachers' qualifications; the aims, content and organisation of the programme; the study environment for students or postgraduate students; throughput; attainment of objectives and the existence of evaluations and quality assurance measures. These criteria are applied in evaluating the programmes.

Subjects

To identify the programmes to be evaluated, data provided by Statistics Sweden and the National Agency's NU database has been used to draw up a scheme to enable the programmes subject to evaluation to be assessed over a six-year period, the "six-year plan". This plan was confirmed after the higher education institutions had been given an opportunity to express

¹⁸ Government bill *Studentinflytande och kvalitetsutveckling i högskolan* (Bill 1999/2000:28)

their opinions. Before evaluations begin in any one year, the institutions are invited to comment and the six-year plan is then revised. During 2002, a new search was made of the Statistics Sweden and NU databases to update the plan and to identify any new subjects that required evaluation.

Self-evaluation

The National Agency's evaluations are based on a department's own self-evaluation and a site visit. Self-evaluation involves the department making its own analysis and evaluation of its programmes/activities. The starting point is the National Agency's self-evaluation directives, which consist of a number of questions that reflect aspects of quality.¹⁹

The National Agency's experiences from the first year of the quality evaluation scheme show that the quality of these self-evaluations varies greatly. Some self-evaluations contain well-grounded assessments, with penetrating analysis of how the departments operate, and contribute greatly to their own quality development processes. Other self-evaluations can be described as brief descriptions of what goes on with no further analysis. In some cases self-evaluations have been scrutinised by a senior administrator outside the department before being submitted to the National Agency. It goes without saying that it is extremely

important for both the department and the National Agency's evaluation that a self-evaluation really constitutes an analysis and assessment of the department's own activities. In some cases the National Agency has decided to refer a self-evaluation back to a department for supplementary information.

The self-evaluation process provides a basis for the work of the group of external assessors who undertake the actual evaluation. The group of assessors examines the self-evaluation report, requests any supplementary information needed, and visits the department. There assessors talk to the administrators, teachers and students. They then summarise their impressions in the report submitted to the National Agency. The National Agency bases its opinion on this report and, if required, makes a decision about the right to award degrees.

The organisation of the reports

The first year's evaluations have resulted in very extensive reports, often containing detailed descriptions of each department. Experience has shown that these descriptions may not provide much that is new for the departments. The National Agency therefore intends this year to change the organisation of the reports.

Information to students

A summary of the results of each evaluation is published

¹⁹ *Nationella ämnes- och programutvärderingar. Anvisningar för självvärdering [National evaluation of subjects and programmes. Directives for self-evaluation]*. Högskoleverket, utvärderingsavdelningen (revised 1 December 2001).

on the Agency's information page for students on the web – www.studera.nu – under the heading *Utbildningarnas kvalitet* [Quality evaluation]. These summaries of the evaluation reports are mainly intended for future students and describe, for instance, teaching methods, types of examination, collaboration with other departments, student influence and studying abroad.

The National Agency has commissioned a study of the information about quality evaluations on www.studera.nu.²⁰ It dealt only with the evaluations of two subjects – computer science and media and communication science. On the whole those polled consider that comparisons of programmes are desirable. Many students are satisfied to be given some idea of the profile/specialisation that different programmes may have. However, they would like more, concrete, uniform and comparable information in some kind of table. They think that the information is too vague and general. This survey confirms the Agency's own experience of the difficulty of providing student information based on the evaluations. Developments are under way which would involve supplementing the information in the evaluation reports with comparative statistics in order to improve the information available to students.

Follow-up

Three to five months after the completion of an evaluation, a feedback conference is normally arranged for the

departments concerned. After one to three years the National Agency reviews the recommendations and decisions that the evaluation gave rise to. Hitherto, two feedback conferences have been held. Experiences from them have been highly positive. They have provided the departments evaluated with an opportunity to discuss their experiences. Final beneficiaries have also been invited to attend these conferences and made contributions from their perspective.

Communication to and within the higher education institutions

As the evaluations have proceeded, occasions have arisen for reflection both on the way in which communication between the higher education institutions and the National Agency functions and also on channels of communication within the individual institutions. Both during the preparation process and while the evaluations are taking place, consultation has taken place between the National Agency and the higher education institutions. When an evaluation is initiated, the institutions are contacted and invited to express their opinions. The six-year plan is reviewed annually in consultation with the higher education institutions. While the evaluation is under way the National Agency maintains contact, mainly through the individual nominated as contact person by the institution. Some information is sent to the Vice-Chancellor and to the individual nominated

²⁰ *Utvärdering av studera.nu* [Evaluation of studera.nu] (Borell Market Research AB, 2001).



by the institution as either responsible for quality assurance or as contact person. In drawing up a timetable for an entire six-year period, the National Agency has attempted to make it easier for the individual departments to plan for the evaluation both in terms of time and funding. This notwithstanding, one or two departments have claimed that they were unaware that they were to be evaluated during a specific period. This indicates communication difficulties both between the National Agency and the higher education institutions and within them.

Great interest in the quality evaluation scheme

The National Agency's work with the new quality evaluation scheme has aroused great interest in Sweden and in other countries. During the past year, a large number of study visits have been made to the Agency. In Sweden this interest has come from student organisations, representatives of the higher education institutions and other national agencies. Interest from abroad has been expressed by both representatives of agencies themselves responsible for evaluations and from higher education institutions. Representative of the National Agency have also participated in national and inter-

national conferences, where they have presented the quality evaluation process. The evaluations have also attracted attention in the mass media. They have been referred to in both local and national media.

Quality assurance of the Agency's quality evaluation procedures

The National Agency has adopted a number of different measures to assure the quality of and develop the implementation of the new quality evaluation scheme.

The Agency has established an international advisory group, the Advisory Board. This group consist of five internationally recognised researchers in this area.²¹ Representative of the National Agency have met the group on a number of occasions, and it has also expressed its opinion of the work of the Agency in a report.²² The group will continue its work at a meeting in May 2002 at which the evaluations of the preceding year will be discussed and also how this work is to continue. One of the important points made by the group is that to avoid the standardisation that may result from predetermined evaluation criteria, it is important for the Agency to stress that one of the main intentions of the evaluation process is quality development. In this context it is important to highlight examples of good

²¹ They are Martin Trow, Center for Studies in Higher Education, Berkeley (chair), Mary Henkel, Brunel University, Ernie House, University of Colorado at Boulder, Guy Neave, CHEPS and International Association of Universities and Bente Kristensen, Handelshögskolan in Köpenhamn.

²² *The National Reviews of Swedish Higher Education. A Report. The International Advisory Committee to the National Agency for Higher Education.* Martin Trow (Chair), Mary Henkel, Ernie House, Guy Neave, June 2001.

practice. The advisory group also stresses the importance of accounting for the frames of reference of the groups of assessors in the reports.

A number of external researchers are also conducting an appraisal of how the model adopted by the National Agency for the evaluation of quality in higher education actually works in practice. A final report will be published in June.²³

This appraisal is to be based mainly on questionnaires sent to a selection of the higher education institutions involved. These include questions about various aspects of the evaluation process, such as how communication functioned between the National Agency and the institution, perceptions of the process of self-evaluation and the meetings with the groups of assessors, what benefit and practical usefulness has been derived from the evaluation report and what measures are being planned and implemented as a result of the report. As the respondents are at different stages of the evaluation procedure, their responses reflect varying experiences and assessments of the process.

Preliminary findings indicate a multifaceted impression with both negative and positive judgements. Greater explicitness on the part of the National Agency is desired. When it comes to the purpose of the evaluations, some responses emphasise their significance for quality development, while others would like the

supervisory aspect to be more clearly defined. The findings also show that the National Agency's evaluations have given rise to greater collective awareness of the workings of their own programmes. In some cases, the evaluation has helped to define the academic approach more clearly, profiles have been adopted and strategic considerations affecting planning and quality assurance have become more explicit. The respondents have also pointed out that the evaluations have confirmed what the departments already knew.

The National Agency is also a member of Nordic and European Networks of evaluating agencies. In the Nordic network for quality assurance organisations a pilot study is currently being undertaken to devise criteria to be used for the mutual accreditation of evaluation organisations.

The feedback conferences that conclude each evaluation provide information about how the evaluations function and what needs to be changed. The Agency is also conducting its own internal follow-up and development of its quality review procedures.

In addition, the National Agency provides training in a number of different ways. These include internal courses in evaluation for the Agency's own staff, and also training sessions for assessors in connection with the evaluations.

²³ The researchers are Ove Karlsson (project leader), Department of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Mälardalen University College, Inger Andersson, Department of Education, Uppsala University and Anna Lundin, Department of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Mälardalen University College. The group's evaluation is of an exploratory nature.

The assessors

Assessors are appointed by the National Agency on the recommendation of and in consultation with the departments to be evaluated. The groups of assessors include both subject experts, representatives of undergraduate and postgraduate students and also, where programmes leading to the award of a vocational qualification are concerned, a representative of the labour market. International expertise should also be represented in the groups of assessors. The subject experts appointed by the National Agency are required to have a scholarly/artistic and a professional reputation, teaching expertise, legitimacy in the discipline and personal integrity.

In appointing groups of assessors, the National Agency's aim has been to include equal numbers of men and women as assessors, and also to include a geographic spread of assessors from the various major higher education institutions. As the evaluations comprise so many higher education institutions, in a number of cases permanent groups of assessors have been created (three permanent groups were involved in the evaluation of business administration, for instance) or groups that are large enough to allow variation in the composition of the groups making site visits (as was the case where mathematics was involved). The groups have worked in parallel, but have held joint discussions.

In all, 101 assessors made up the various groups

involved in the 2001 evaluations. International expertise is well represented. A conspicuous number of departments proposed Scandinavian assessors and this has affected the composition of the groups. If undergraduate and postgraduate students are excluded, 64 per cent of the assessors come from outside Sweden, mainly from the Nordic countries. Few assessors (apart from the student representatives) come from the smaller higher education institutions. Among the subject experts there is a marked predominance of professors over university lecturers.

In two evaluations, theology/religious studies and media and communication science, final beneficiaries were represented. The National Agency considers that it is vital that the opinions of final beneficiaries are included in the evaluations. This can be ensured in a number of ways. One is to include representatives of the labour market in the groups of assessors. Another is to assimilate the points of view of final beneficiaries in the feedback conferences that conclude each evaluation. In addition special studies are undertaken.

Despite the ambition to include equal numbers of women and men in the groups of assessors, the lack of balance between the genders still cannot be ignored. As is shown by the table below, 36 of the 101 assessors were women, i.e. 36 per cent. Only 3 of the 19 representatives of postgraduate students were women. Three of the groups were chaired by women.

Table 3: Assessors. Categories, women/men

Assessors, category	Women	Men
Chairpersons	3	9
Other assessors (apart from undergraduate and postgraduate students)	18	32
Undergraduates	12	8
Postgraduates	3	16
Totals	36	65

Student perspectives in the evaluations

The student perspective plays a central role in the National Agency's evaluations of quality. Undergraduate and postgraduate students are included in all the groups of assessors. They participate on the same terms as the other assessors. This means that they review the self-evaluations, take part in the site visits and are involved in the production of the report.

The normal procedure has been for the National Agency to contact some of the departments participating in the evaluation and ask them to convey an invitation to the department's students to nominate representatives in the group of assessors. When the group of assessors has been appointed the student union at the higher education institution has been informed. Postgraduate student representatives have been nominated in the same way. Undergraduate and

postgraduate students do not participate in the evaluation of their own departments, which applies to the other assessors as well.

The student representatives in the groups of assessors have all declared how much they have learned from being an assessor, even though it has also transpired that postgraduate students may feel vulnerable in the role of assessor as they are often in a situation of dependence. The Swedish National Union of Students (SFS) has plans to conduct a follow-up survey of how student representatives in the groups of assessors have experienced their role. During 2002, the National Agency is also going to arrange a seminar on the participation of student representatives in the groups of assessors.

Undergraduate and postgraduate students play a central role in the departmental self-evaluations. Stress is laid in the directives for these self-evaluations on how important it is, if the self-evaluation is to be as beneficial as possible for the department and provide a basis for the development of its own programmes, for the work to involve as many as possible, including undergraduates and postgraduates. This does not always seem to be the case.

During the site visits the groups of assessors always meet one group of undergraduate students and one group of postgraduate students.

Student Mirror

To provide material to supplement the evaluations and

to lay further stress on the importance of the student perspective, the National Agency conducts a national questionnaire survey of learning quality, known as the Student Mirror. This is a nationwide survey that is intended to bring to light student perceptions of what encourages learning, critical thinking, analytical ability and provide a positive personal development. During the autumn of 2001, this questionnaire was distributed

to 16,000 students at 33 higher education institutions in Sweden. The findings will be presented in a report in August 2002. The findings of the Student Mirror also provide a basis for the development work of the higher education institutions themselves. This questionnaire survey is intended to be a regular event. There are also plans for a corresponding survey at postgraduate level, to be called the Postgraduate Mirror.

» What do the reports show?

What programmes have been evaluated?

The table below presents the evaluations undertaken during 2001 and how many individual reviews they involved.²⁴ As can be seen from the table 222 programmes were reviewed during the year. The evaluation of linguistics involved fewest reviews, twelve in all. The most extensive evaluation concerned business administration, in which 37 programmes were reviewed.

Table 4: The total number of evaluations/reviews

Evaluation/subject	Number of reviews*
Computer science	22
Media and communication studies	22
Classical languages	23
Theology and religious studies	22
Mathematics	36
Swedish and Scandinavian languages	19
Business administration	37
Economics	29
Linguistics	12
Total	222

* Includes both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes.
Source: The National Agency for Higher Education's Annual Report for 2001

Summary and analysis

The idea of presenting a summary and analysis of the evaluations undertaken during 2001 was conceived before they had been completed. The Agency realised that it would be required to summarise the wealth of information they would produce to provide some form of survey, and that it was at the same time important to focus on general observations and conclusions.

Even though the evaluations have been based on a shared approach and had broad aspects to cover, the results, in the form of the final reports, vary nevertheless in both content and extent. This is related to the decisions of the assessors to focus differently on various aspects and to the number of institutions offering the programmes. This tallies with the recommendations of the National Agency's International Advisory Board that the individual characteristics of the various subjects/departments should be taken into account and that any standardisation of the evaluations should be avoided. It should perhaps be pointed out that these differences have had no significance when the right of the higher education institutions to award degrees has been questioned.

²⁴ The evaluations took place during 2001, all of the reports but two were, however, published in 2002. (For the reports see *References*.)

The summary below is based on the evaluation reports and refers to both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Special prominence has been given to one or two observations concerning postgraduate programmes as this is the first time that they have been included in the National Agency's evaluations.

One positive outcome is that each evaluation has covered all the courses offered in Sweden, both undergraduate and postgraduate, in the appropriate subjects/programmes to provide an overall view of the situation. Unlike accreditation appraisals, which focus only on specific programmes, the National Agency's evaluations display the similarities and the differences within the same subject. A very valuable addition to the reports is the characterisation of the various subjects that the assessors have included.

What, then, is said about the programmes in computer science, media and communication studies, classical languages, theology and religious studies, mathematics, Swedish and Scandinavian languages, business administration, economics and linguistics? Firstly, it is gratifying to be able to determine that only in a few cases is the right to award degrees questioned and that there are many examples of good practice from different departments. Nevertheless, there is room for development in many respects.

Young subjects – unclear definitions

A great deal is expected and much is required of higher education institutions today, and it is not infrequently

claimed that they fail to live up these expectations. It is often suggested that a greater degree of inter-disciplinary study could enable the development of programmes in higher education that would better correspond to the requirements of a community and a labour market subject to rapid changes.

Among the subjects evaluated in 2001 are computer science and media and communication studies. Both are young subjects, which have developed rapidly and are being offered by an increasing number of higher education institutions. The great demand for computer specialists that applied when the evaluations were conducted, meant that many students were able to find work before the completion of their studies. But rapid development has also given rise to certain problems. Both computer science and media and communication studies suffer from a certain "lack of identity". In the case of computer science there is not yet any accepted Swedish term for the discipline, and the terms used, *datalogi* and *datavetenskap* can have different meanings in different contexts and at different higher education institutions, so that they embrace a wide range of definitions and programmes with varying contents. Although this may not seem a very important point, it can play a significant role when key figures are being developed or programmes compared from an international perspective.

Similar considerations apply in the case of media and communication studies. This discipline, with its roots in the humanities and social sciences, covers a wide area.

But in many parts of Sweden it is very unclear, not least for students, what the programmes lead to. Many students begin their studies with the wrong expectations, and this can result in unnecessary drop-outs.

More explicit identity and demarcation is essential where research and postgraduate programmes are concerned. This contrasts with concepts such as breadth and a multi-disciplinary approach. It is not possible to retain breadth if a dynamic research environment is to be achieved. Here the assessors are in agreement and the opinion is repeated in evaluation after evaluation. Successful research requires specialisation and research activities that have distinct profiles.

Small subjects – major problems

The Classical languages – Latin, Greek and Modern Greek – are small subjects with few teachers, few students and limited research activities. They are very vulnerable environments which are dependent on individual teachers. This is nothing new and has been pointed out for many years now. It is, however, surprising how long it is taking for changes to be made. Despite the small environments, there is still an ambition to offer all-round undergraduate and postgraduate programmes that cover the entire discipline. These ambitions cannot, however, be sustained, which leads to the emergence of unofficial and fundamentally transient profiles that depend on the main area of the professors' research.

Some of what has been said here about Classical languages also applies to linguistics. Here too the

environments are small, with a great shortage of teachers and very weak and fluctuating recruitment. Like Classical languages, linguistics has grand ambitions to cover broad areas of the discipline in its postgraduate programmes.

Collaboration and concentration are essential if the conditions required for a critical and creative research environment are to be attained, and here the higher education institutions must come to agreement about how this can best be achieved.

Old subjects – tradition and change

Scandinavian languages is a discipline with a long tradition in Swedish higher education. Today Swedish and Scandinavian languages is one of the disciplines with the widest geographical distribution in Sweden. The subject also covers a wide range of content, which is still influenced by the past in the sense that several institutions are anxious to reflect the breadth of the discipline. In consequence, teaching in the subject often appears to uphold tradition, and its core task considered to be the schooling of teachers of Swedish in a wide range of skills, according to the assessors. The requirement that it should respond to needs in programmes and research in the Swedish language and provide vocational groups other than teachers with good linguistic proficiency is one of the most important messages for subject providers in this discipline.

Teaching in theology and religious studies was once the responsibility of two faculties, but today it is being

offered at about 20 higher education institutions. Increased demand for religious studies, both in higher education and in the community, has played its part in this development, as a result of growing interest in issues pertaining to theology, religious studies and ethics. The meaning of life has also become a natural element in programmes in management and leadership, and an “ethical dimension” has been incorporated into a number of university subjects and research areas in recent years. In many technological and medical disciplines, there is a lively debate about the philosophical and ethical ground of research, and of its ethical implications. Programmes in theology have not yet, however, been able to derive full benefit from these favourable social changes.

Mathematics is one of the oldest disciplines and technological developments in particular have resulted in an increased need of mathematical expertise. Mathematics has traditionally been a required subject in the natural sciences and engineering. Today increasing use is being made of more advanced mathematical methods that were once of sole interest to mathematicians as standard procedures in the natural sciences and engineering. At the same time disciplines that previously based their concepts on more qualitative and verbal descriptions are beginning to make wider use of descriptions couched in mathematical terms, such as in economics, biology and medicine.

Mathematics is one of the largest subjects in the higher education system, but it needs to recruit more

students to the more advanced courses. The assessors point out that there is a growing demand for mathematicians, and that currently there is a shortage as a result, for instance, of the impending retirement of mathematics teachers from primary up to university level. The chances of finding work on completion of a programme in mathematics are therefore good and could be used by the higher education institutions as an argument when recruiting students.

Economics subjects – uniformity and variety

Unlike many other social science subjects, economics is characterised by its homogeneity. Core elements of economics are determined both nationally and internationally. There are considerable similarities in the contents of courses and the progression demanded in the programmes between departments/institutions and countries. This means for instance that there is a pronounced demand for the various departments in Sweden to provide students with programmes that will enable them to compete with their peers. The demands made by students who want to be able to compete internationally are therefore also high.

Business administration is a subject that has developed to cover more areas and in which inter-disciplinary elements have been introduced. It is a popular subject which is attractive to students, which has led to most of the departments exploiting the possibility to expand. Unlike many other subjects, there are also very large

numbers of students progressing to their third and fourth semesters of study. This figure is lower, however, at the university colleges than at the older universities, which could reflect the smaller number of optional courses offered at the former. The rapid development of the subject seems to have caused certain problems when it comes to arranging the specialisation required for award of a master's degree.

General observations

Too few teachers who work too much

One recurrent observation concerns the heavy teacher workloads. Heavy teaching loads can be found everywhere, often with large and heterogeneous groups of students at the lower levels. Not infrequently there is a shortage of teachers with doctorates, which results in difficult staffing problems and increased stress. It is still generally claimed that administrative demands are growing and that it is difficult for teachers to find time for their own research. Even though this testimony is relatively unanimous, there are examples of failure to make full use of supervisory capacity in one or two programmes.

More resources needed

The lack of funding is referred to everywhere, often in fairly general terms. Examples of the results of lack of funding can be found in the teachers' workloads and the reduction of classroom teaching in some subjects to very few hours each week. In many cases, it is also

added that the objective of "opening higher education" cannot be attained without additional resources, as it is assumed that a greater degree of individualisation will be needed. There is also a general concern at departments about the requirement that postgraduate students are to have funding for their entire programme. Many departments consider that they have had to reject qualified postgraduate students, which clashes with the demands often expressed in the community for more postgraduate qualifications.

How are resources used?

There are some who maintain that a more fruitful approach to the issue of funding would be to discuss possible changes and feasible measures within the framework of the methods of allocating funds at the higher education institutions. In this context, a greater degree of strategic thinking is required, as the decisions concerned are not merely administrative ones. In some subjects, the group of assessors expresses the fear that the academic environment that is emerging is operationally focused – and only concerned to a small extent with development.

The economists widen the issue of inadequate resources to pose the question of whether the current system of allocating funds provides adequate incentives and if the intended outcomes are achieved. In the current system, departments have a financial interest in registering as many students as possible in first-semester programmes and offering them teaching that costs as little as possible.

This means that in some cases the only teaching they receive at this level consists of large-scale lectures. At the same time there is a political objective of attracting as many students as possible from environments that have no traditional links with higher education.

Profiles, collaboration and concentration

The proposals about how to come to grips with problems like low-volume courses and inadequate funding involve establishing profiles, concentration and collaboration. Several subjects find it difficult to recruit new students and in most of the subjects evaluated there are large number of students in the first and second semester courses (A and B level) but numbers subsequently decline. In subjects which form part of teacher-training programmes it is reasonable for there to be large numbers at these levels. But the failure of many students to go any further may be linked to the difficulties they experience in their studies. This is said with reference to the many complaints about the inadequate knowledge possessed by beginner students.

It is important to point out that there are a number of good examples of collaboration and the adoption of profiles. It is, however, more striking that so little collaboration takes place in several isolated environments, which is where the situation in Sweden differs from the other Scandinavian countries. In many cases the critical and creative environment required if higher education is to deserve the name cannot be provided without extensive collaboration. This applies above all

to languages at the universities and also other subjects in the third and fourth semester courses (C and D level) and in particular the university colleges that have been awarded the right to establish areas of research. They are recommended therefore to delay initiating postgraduate programmes.

The conditions for postgraduate programmes vary

As is the case with undergraduate programmes, it transpires that the conditions on which postgraduate programmes are offered and how they are organised vary a great deal between subjects and within the various higher education institutions. This may involve infrastructure such as access to office space, student computers and support or the way in which postgraduate programmes are planned. The element of taught courses may vary from 40–80 credit points, which means in practice that some students have less time to write their thesis. The way in which supervision is offered and the resources available also vary greatly; in many cases the individual syllabuses do not provide the basis for supervision they are intended to. It has also transpired that postgraduate students teach for more than 20 per cent of their post at one independent university college.

In a number of cases postgraduate programmes are being offered in environments that are too small to ensure their academic quality. Among teachers there is also concern that it will be impossible to produce the

number of doctors required to take over their teaching when large numbers retire as expected in the next few years. This issue arises when the limited number of third and fourth semester students results in fewer applicants to postgraduate programmes. In one or two cases there is supervisory capacity that is not being utilised.

Collaboration in networks and graduate schools at a national level are the solutions proposed to make postgraduate teaching more effective and ensure the sustainability of subjects. The unwillingness displayed by some institutions about recruiting postgraduate students from outside institutions should also be considered.

Internationalisation

Higher education institutions operate by their very nature in an international setting. One aspect of internationalisation involves teacher and student exchange. There are examples of considerable student mobility in some subjects. Awareness of the quality of exchanges is not equally as prevalent. In most cases, however, international student exchange is not as extensive and the main reason is said to be lack of student interest.

Student influence and gender equality

Formally organised student influence works well in most cases, even though there are examples of students not taking advantage of the positions they are entitled to. Many students testify to the good relations they have with their teachers and that they are approachable but, nevertheless, more can be done with regard to informal

influence. This has been brought to the attention of the National Agency, for instance, by the increasing numbers of students who write or phone because they cannot gain a hearing for their often justifiable comments.

There are still shortcomings where gender equality is concerned, and too little is being done in certain subjects traditionally dominated by men such as theology and economics. In theology men dominate among the staff and there are more men taking postgraduate courses, even though women predominate in undergraduate courses throughout the country. It is also worth noting that the converse applies, even though it appears to be more unusual, as in Swedish and Scandinavian languages, where women predominate among undergraduate and postgraduate students and to some extent among teachers as well. Media and communication studies is a subject in which women predominate among undergraduate students but occupy few more exalted positions.

Good examples of departments attempting to rectify gender imbalance can be found in mathematics, in which role models have been created and special forms of supervision adopted.

Evaluation and quality assurance

The requirement that every programme should have a functioning course evaluation system and that the results have to be followed up has now become one of the provisions of the Higher Education Ordinance. It can be determined that course evaluations are conducted more

or less intensively in all programmes at undergraduate level. The situation is less satisfactory, however, when it comes to communicating the results to students. Most of the programmes fail to live up to this requirement. The National Agency has urged departments to take measures and will monitor the outcome when it follows up the evaluated programmes in three years.

The National Agency intends to undertake a special study of the use made of formal student influence, including course evaluations, in the higher education institutions.

Course evaluations are conducted very sporadically in postgraduate programmes. It can well be understood that the need is smaller, in view of the low numbers of students on some postgraduate courses and that individual students can be identified without difficulty.

Why is the right to award degrees questioned?

When the right to award degrees is questioned, the department involved has not been able to live up to the minimum standards required within higher education. When this happens, the department lacks the circumstances that will enable the creation of a critical and creative environment. In some cases the academic level of the subject has been considered inadequate.

The higher education institution must rectify these shortcomings within one year of publication of the

report. Otherwise the right to award degrees is withdrawn, if the criticism applies to undergraduate programmes. Postgraduate programmes are the responsibility of the government. One gratifying result is that only in 8 cases have the 222 reviews resulted in the right to award degrees being questioned. However, the reports contain a large number of proposals addressed to the individual departments. The National Agency takes it for granted that these will be dealt with as effectively as possible.

In an ideal world, the National Agency's evaluations should either result in the right to award degrees being questioned or the opposite. In practice, however, it has turned out that an intermediate stage is needed, one that is more binding than the general advice and recommendations made to the individual departments that they can deal with at their own discretion. The Agency has therefore issued serious criticism in one or two cases.

When serious criticism has been made of a higher education institution, and it offers several postgraduate programmes, it is allowed six months before a plan of action has to be submitted. The National Agency then decides on the adoption of any further measures. Where postgraduate programmes are concerned, the Agency may, should it prove necessary, recommend the government to withdraw the right to award degrees. Serious criticism has been expressed on the basis of ten reviews.

» To the government

The information yielded by the evaluations is primarily addressed to the individual departments and the higher education institutions, as ultimately it is the institutions that are responsible for the quality of their programmes. The National Agency therefore assumes that the higher education institutions will use this information in the course of their continued work of improving their programmes. At the same time, some of the circumstances brought to light in this report are of such a nature that they may require action on the part of the government to prevent undesirable effects. The National Agency would therefore like to conclude by drawing a number of points to the attention of the government.

Profiles, collaboration and concentration

The proposals concerning the adoption of profiles, collaboration and concentration are examples of how the higher education institutions can improve small environments that are not sufficiently critical and creative. Environments of this kind, with few teachers, few students, and fluctuating recruitment, have been discovered in both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes and at both universities and university colleges.

Where Classical languages are concerned, awareness of the problem of low-volume subjects has existed for a

long time without the necessary changes being introduced. The question today is whether conditions are more favourable now than in the past and will enable the higher education institutions concerned to reach agreement and solve the problems on their own. Perhaps strategic considerations about the survival of these subjects need to be taken at a national level?

Teacher workloads

A great deal has been written and said about the deterioration of working conditions for teachers in recent years and increased resources have been demanded from various quarters. These evaluations prove to be no exception in this respect. Descriptions of the pressure under which many teachers work, with many, varied and demanding teaching commitments and lack of time for their own research and skill enhancement indicate that the future consequences will almost certainly be negative. In addition to the risk of teachers wearing themselves out too soon, students are affected as well. One result is that in some quarters the amount of classroom teaching offered to students has declined to three hours a week. A tendency to offer teaching to students in their first and second semesters in the form of large-scale lectures has also been noted. This is a teaching method that is unlikely to develop the critical

ability of students. A situation could arise in which what seems to departments to be most profitable and worth investing in runs counter to the attainment of important educational objectives.

The working conditions for teachers must be taken seriously, and it is not enough for the National Agency to state that the current situation can be ascribed to lack of resources on a more general level.

This situation should also be viewed against the background of the goal of “opening higher education”, or in other words broadening recruitment and increasing diversity. Demands that the higher education institutions and the departments provide adequate support for student learning will rise as will the methodological expertise demanded of teachers. The recently completed enquiry into the system of allocating funds did not deal in any more depth with the incentive structure and to what extent the system helps to ensure that the intended outcomes are attained. Further investigation should be made into the question of the link between financial incentives and educational outcomes.

Few students at more advanced levels

The fact that few students go on to more advanced levels, especially to postgraduate programmes, means that future growth in a subject is blighted and that recruiting new teachers and researchers may become a serious problem at a local level. Certain subjects also have strategic implications for the country as a whole. For instance, what impact could difficulties in

recruiting undergraduate and postgraduate students to mathematics programmes have on the engineering and scientific skills needed in the community? A more penetrating study could be included in the enquiry proposed above.

Lack of gender equality

It has been established that too little is being done in subjects traditionally dominated by men such as theology and economics. In Swedish and Scandinavian languages, however, women predominate at all levels and also to some extent among teaching staff. The question here is whether there is reason to adopt any measures at national level. Before the National Agency carries out its follow-up evaluation of student influence, gender equality and social and ethnic diversity next year, it would be possible to define its directives more precisely.

Postgraduate programmes

Where postgraduate programmes are concerned, it has transpired that the conditions on which they are offered vary greatly both within any specific subject and from subject to subject. There are, for instance, great variations in the relationship between taught courses/thesis work in one and the same subject. It has been stipulated that all candidates for a PhD have to write a thesis that comprises at least 80 credit points. When the extent of taught courses can vary as much as from 40 to 80 credit points, it is reasonable to wonder how the programmes

cope with these differences. The National Agency can help to provide clarification on this issue if the government considers it imperative.

Course evaluations

There are shortcomings at most departments when it comes to feedback of the results of course evaluations and in taking measures to improve circumstances that come to light. More needs to be done. The National Agency is going to launch a special study in its role as a supervisory agency.

Questioning the right to award postgraduate degrees

The National Agency is not empowered to withdraw the right to award postgraduate degrees. Nevertheless serious criticism has been expressed in a number of cases. If the necessary improvements are not forthcoming, in the current circumstances the National Agency can merely recommend the government to question the right to award degrees. What is to happen thereafter is not clear. It is important to clarify the procedure in view

of the expectation of the higher education institutions concerned that they will receive clear information on a matter that is so important for them.

Future quality audits

The second round of audits of the quality assurance procedures at the higher education institutions concludes at the end of 2002. The government has announced that audits will continue to be made, albeit in a simplified form. Experiences from the second round of audits show that some higher education institutions are very successful in their quality assurance procedures while others are still in the initial phases. The Agency is proposing, as has already been stated, a simplified, needs-related system of quality audits. However, the National Agency would already like to raise the question of what more far-reaching consequences should be considered for cases in which future audits of the quality assurance procedures of higher education institutions do not indicate any more tangible progress. The National Agency intends to revert to this issue in a written submission to the government.

» References

Quality audits

These references are to English summaries found on the National Agency's website, www.hsv.se

Continuation Audit of the University College of Opera in Stockholm (National Agency report 2000:10 AR)

Continuation Audit of the University College of Borås (National Agency report 2000:4 AR)

Continuation Audit of the University College of Gävle (National Agency report 2000:9 AR)

Continuation Audit of the University College of Jönköping (National Agency report 2000:7 AR)

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