



# How did things turn out?

The National Agency's Quality Appraisals 2002

Högskoleverkets rapportserie 2003:25 R

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### **The National Agency's Quality Appraisals 2002**

Produced by the National Agency for Higher Education

Högskoleverkets rapportserie 2003:25 R

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# Preface »

The second year of national evaluations within the framework of the new quality review system has now been concluded. The evaluations resulting from 264 appraisals of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes have been presented in 11 reports. At the same time the second round of audits of quality assurance and improvement procedures at the higher education institutions has also come to an end. All in all, these quality reviews constitute an impressive achievement that has involved both representatives from the higher education institutions – teachers, undergraduate and postgraduate students together with those responsible for quality assurance – and the staff of the National Agency for Higher Education. Subject experts and representatives of the labour market, both from Sweden and from abroad, have also participated as assessors in this process.

The first section of this volume contains an account of experiences from the second round of quality audits, which also includes comparisons with the first round. This account answers the question of how much progress the higher education institutions have made in developing systematic quality assurance and improvement procedures. The second section deals with the national evaluations of subjects and programmes. How has the evaluation process developed? How is its quality assured? What do the evaluation reports have to say? What changes have the quality evaluations helped to bring about? The concluding section contains a discussion of the general findings of the quality evaluations.

It is our belief and hope that the overall analysis of the quality reviews presented here will further stimulate continued discussion and activity at various levels in the higher education sector – all in order to ensure that the programmes offered at higher education institutions will develop to become even better than they already are.



Sigbrit Franke  
University Chancellor



# Summary »

This volume contains an analysis of the second round of the National Agency's audits of quality assurance procedures at institutional level, which has now been completed, and of the second year of the evaluations of subjects and programmes in the six-year quality review system launched in 2001.

Of the 39 higher education institutions, 33 have now undergone two audits of their quality assurance procedures. At most of those audited, improvements in quality assurance procedures had been made between the first and second round. However, only four of the institutions had developed totally self-regulating quality systems in the sense that they are structured to function so that planning, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and improvement phases follow on from each other. The future form of quality assurance audits is to be reviewed. No audits of the current kind will take place until the current cycle of evaluations of subjects and programmes concludes in 2006.

A total of 130 assessors have, together with the Agency's own staff, conducted 264 appraisals of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in the following subjects: archaeology, Baltic languages, Celtic languages, chemistry, classical archaeology, economic history, Egyptology, environmental and health protection, environmental engineering, environmental science, history, Slavic languages and east and central European studies, and also programmes leading to the award of qualifications in engineering, marine engineering, navigation and social work.

The findings show that most programmes maintain good standards, a source of congratulation for the Sweden higher education institutions. However, the right to award degrees has been questioned in a number of cases, most often because the content a programme was not considered to correspond to the degree awarded. Several of the problems already noted last year recur this year as well. These concern lack of resources and the heavy workloads of the teaching staff, the problems for small subjects, declining enrolment catchments for a number of programmes, variations in the conditions for postgraduate students and course evaluations that do not function as intended.

At the follow-up conferences, in the action plans requested by the National Agency, and from questions addressed to the staff at the institutions responsible for quality assurance or quality co-ordinators, the Agency has been able to determine that the evaluations have contributed to a number of improvements. Not least important is the help they are said to have provided in increasing awareness of the importance of quality issues and the introduction of increasingly purposeful quality assurance routines.

The National Agency works continually to assure the quality of the evaluations and to develop procedures. During 2002 studies of the evaluation model

have been produced and a meeting took place with “The Advisory Board” – the National Agency’s international group of advisors. Special seminars have also been arranged for staff responsible for quality assurance at the higher education institutions and quality co-ordinators together with undergraduate and postgraduate students.

# Quality audits 1999–2002 »

## Background

One prominent feature of the 1993 reform of higher education was the extensive transfer of responsibility and powers from government agencies to the administrations of the higher education institutions themselves. As a result of the reform, each institution was given the responsibility of devising methods of assuring and developing the quality of its activities. To provide support for this process, since 1995 the National Agency for Higher Education has been auditing quality assurance procedures at the higher education institutions in Sweden. These audits have at the same time constituted one element in the government's supervision and monitoring of how the institutions operate. It is important to emphasise that the quality audits conducted by the National Agency have not focused primarily on the quality of these operations but rather on the measures, strategies, methods and systems developed at the institutions to assure this quality.

In the period since 1995, 33 of the 39 higher education institutions have undergone two audits of their quality assurance procedures.<sup>1</sup> The first audits took place between 1995–1998. During the period 1999–2002 a follow-up round has been conducted. In principal, these later audits have had three aims. To begin with they have focused on following up the *recommendations* made in the first round of audits. Secondly, they were intended to ascertain how much progress had been made at the institutions in the development of a *self-regulating* system. In addition, a third aim was to assess the extent of the *impact* of their quality assurance procedures on the organisation of the institutions as a whole.

The National Agency arranged two evaluations of the first round of audits – one when the round was half-completed<sup>2</sup> and an external appraisal of all the reports published between 1995–1998.<sup>3</sup> Corresponding accounts are presented here for the second round. The publication *How did things turn out? The National Agency's Quality Audits and Evaluations 2001* contained, among other things, a mid-term analysis of the follow-up audits. It covered just over

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1. Södertörn University College has not been subject to any quality audit and Malmö University College, the University College of Gotland, the University College of Arts, Crafts and Design, the Stockholm Institute of Education and the Stockholm School of Economics have only been audited once. Several of them will be audited later.
  2. Kvalitetsarbete – ett sätt att förbättra verksamhetens kvalitet vid universitet och högskolor (Quality management – a way to improve the quality of the activities at the institutions of higher education – mid-term report of the quality audits of higher education institutions).
  3. Stensaker, B., Dom, diagnose, dialog? (Judgment, Diagnosis or Dialogue?)

half of the institutions. In the mid-term analysis the following main features were dealt with:

- Methodology: The consequences of the changes introduced in the implementation of the second round of audits.
- Results: To what extent systematic quality assurance procedures had been developed at the higher education institutions.
- The future: What form should audits of quality assurance procedures take in the future?

During 2002 an additional 16 audits have taken place, and the second round of quality audits has now come to an end. In this publication, therefore, the mid-term results presented in *How did things turn out? The National Agency's Quality Audits and Evaluations 2001* will be followed up and supplemented. The presentation will comprise comparisons between the first and second round of audits and will conclude with reflection and discussion of a number of issues of principle. In addition to the reports on the second round of 33 audits,<sup>4</sup> the presentation is also based on the responses to a number of questions sent to the staff responsible for quality assurance or the quality assurance coordinators at each of the higher education institutions.

## **Methodology**

### **With or without site visits**

In this second round, a simplified procedure was used for the audits in comparison with the first round. The higher education institutions were given the choice of two versions – with or without a site visit. In the traditional system the material available to the panel of assessors consisted of the institution's own self-assessment and also the observations made during a site visit. In the simplified version, several (two–four) institutions are dealt with together. They each submit their own self-assessment but the site visits are replaced by brief meetings with the leadership to discuss points that are not clear, and to acquire supplementary information. About half of the institutions opted for the simplified version.

A majority of the assessors and most of the institutions consider that the simplified method is inadequate. It is pointed out that the lack of a site visit reduces the possibility of making a fair appraisal and this can hardly be compensated by meetings with the management of an institution. Some of the assessors point out, however, that “the simplified model can be used when the institution concerned has made some progress in its endeavours to create and integrate a quality assurance system”. Another regrettable outcome of the simplified model is that the self-evaluations are on the whole less well based

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4. For information about the reports see References.

in what actually takes place and in many cases merely reflect the viewpoints of the management.

Most of the institution staff responsible for quality assurance procedures express positive opinions about the quality audits even though many of them point out at the same time that the twofold demands – i.e. having to participate in the evaluations of subjects and programmes and also in quality audits – are onerous.

### **The panels of assessors**

As in the first round, the panels of assessors have been composed of individuals in leading positions in higher education, representatives of the labour market and students. The following table indicates the overall composition of the panels of assessors for the period 1999–2002.

*Table 1: Composition of the panels of assessors 1999–2002.*

	From higher education		Labour market representatives		Students		Total	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Number of assessors	47	31	21	7	16	16	84	54

A total of 138 individuals have participated in this second round of quality audits, 78 of them came from the universities and other higher education institutions, 28 from the labour market and 32 were students. Approximately two-thirds of those representing higher education were current or former Vice-Chancellors and Pro-Vice-Chancellors. Several of the assessors have previously taken part in the evaluation of subjects and programmes or in the appraisal of the right to award degrees and each group also contained at least one person who was involved in the first audit of the institution concerned.

Only a few panel members have come from abroad. A total of eleven individuals from Norway, Denmark and Finland participated. In this respect a Nordic perspective was more manifest in the evaluations of subjects and programmes. On the whole there is a predominance of men in the panels (84 men and 54 women). The greatest gender imbalance can be found among those representing the labour market, which is mainly due to the difficulty of recruiting women from the commercial sector.

## **Conclusions**

### **What do the recommendations tell us?**

One way of gauging the impact of quality assurance procedures on the operations of the higher education institutions is to study the recommendations

made in the reports from the second round of audits and compare them with those made in the first. A number of observations and comments based on such a comparison are presented below.

First and foremost it is possible to determine that only small changes can be found in the type of recommendations made. In the first round they often related to the role of the management and plans to develop goals for quality assurance procedures. This would appear relatively natural as the higher education institutions were then in the initial stage of their quality assurance work, which mainly involved determining responsibilities and producing mission statements. But the panels of assessors are still – in the second round – calling for improvements in the development of goals and strategies. In other areas, such as participation and monitoring systems, there has been little reduction of the number of remarks. Indeed, where the participation of staff and students in quality assurance procedures is concerned, the proportion of recommendations has even increased somewhat, which could suggest a growing degree of top-down management. Another explanation could be that several institutions are still in the phase of implementing quality assurance procedures and that the task of ensuring participation and widespread support will play a central role in future.

Another similarity between the two rounds of audits is that many of the smaller higher education institutions seem to receive more and considerably more *concrete* recommendations than the larger ones. It is, of course, only possible to speculate about the reasons for this but one may well be that it is easier to gain an overall impression of a smaller institution and therefore to propose changes that can lead to rapid improvements.

The largest differences between the two rounds can be found in recommendations relating to governance and organisation and to skill enhancement, of which there are relatively fewer in the second round. It should, however, be added that even though the total share of recommendations concerning administrative and organisational issues has declined they are still comparatively frequent. Another obvious difference is that the total number of recommendations is substantially smaller in the second round of audits (233) compared with before (516). One explanation could be that the reports are now less extensive on the whole and that the panels of assessors have focused primarily on following up the recommendations made in the first round of audits.

Overall, the fact that similar recommendations are made in the second round to almost the same extent as in the first could seem a relatively disheartening outcome. Can this be taken to mean that no progress has been made during the eight years in which quality assurance audits have been taking place?

In fact, the reports show that the vast majority of the higher education institutions are considered to have made improvements between the first and second audit. These improvements are most visible where issues concerning the governance and organisation of the institutions are concerned. Almost 70

per cent of the institutions account for improvement measures in this respect. It is therefore not surprising that this is the category of recommendation that has seen the greatest proportional decline. Improvements can be determined at nearly half of the institutions on issues concerning their work on goals and strategies, evaluation, student influence, cooperation with other stakeholders, internationalisation and educational development. In certain other areas, however, developments seem to have been less positive, among them staff development.

The general conclusion that can be drawn from the 33 audits is that developments have been positive at virtually all of the institutions – with only one or two exceptions – since the previous audit round. But does this progress mean at the same time that most of the institutions now have systematic quality assurance procedures?

### **How much progress have the institutions made?**

Systematic procedures for quality development involve a structure that, in grossly simplified and purely theoretical terms, can be divided into four consecutive phases<sup>5</sup>:

- In an initial planning phase the institution focuses on the production of mission and policy documents and the appropriate action plans containing formulations of strategies and the allocation of responsibilities. At this stage, quality assurance still merely exists at the ideological level.
- In the following implementation phase the planned objectives and strategies find expression in concrete measures and more and more levels within the institution are involved in quality assurance procedures. In this phase, the institution will not yet have developed an effective feed-back system and cannot therefore indicate any real results of these measures.
- In the monitoring phase efforts are focused on devising functioning systems and methods for determining and monitoring the results that the measures taken in the preceding phase have led to. Course evaluations and surveys of alumni are examples of this kind of method. In this phase methods have also been found for the feed-back of results from one level to another but it is not always clear what use the institution can make of the material that is fed back in this way.
- In the concluding evaluation and improvement phase the institution analyses and evaluates what the results mean for its future operations and adopts measures based on this evaluation. In this phase there is also awareness of how quality assurance procedures, budgetary and operational planning can be integrated to support each other.

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5. Fortsatt granskning och bedömning av kvalitetsarbetet vid universitet och högskolor (Continuation Quality Audits of Universities and University Colleges), p. 22.

Each phase requires development of the preceding phase. The evaluation of outcomes leads to the establishment of new objectives, which then require the planning and introduction of measures to attain them and so on. Linking these components so that they result in continual improvement of operations as a whole is therefore the aim of quality assurance procedures, seen from this point of view.

Before the discussion that will follow, some clarifications are required. It is important to emphasise that it is impossible to make any comparisons *between* the *current* situations of the higher education institutions on the basis of the reports. The reason is simple: the various appraisals reflect circumstances at various points in time. It is not therefore reliable to compare, for example, an institution that underwent the follow-up audit in 1999 with one where the corresponding audit took place in 2002, as circumstances at the first institution have presumably changed in the three years that have elapsed. *It is however possible to compare each institution with itself at different points in time.* These reports therefore provide information about how each institution has developed since its first audit. The discussion below should be considered in this light.

The first round of audits was able to determine that most of the higher education institutions were occupied mainly with their objectives, a few with active measures. At one or two institutions all four phases were in place. In other words, in most quarters quality assurance procedures were still being launched. The visions, goals and strategies – if any existed – of their managements had not been generally endorsed, there were systematic shortcomings in systems for monitoring and evaluation, and operational and financial control were seldom integrated. It seemed as if a great distance remained to be covered before systematic quality assurance procedures could be implemented. What do things look like today? Are the higher education institutions in Sweden able to demonstrate the self-regulating quality assurance procedures required of them?

Now that the second round can be considered complete, an attempt is made below to present an assessment – albeit radically simplified – of how much progress the higher education institutions have made on self-regulating, systematic quality assurance procedures. The assessment covers the 33 institutions that have now undergone two audits and is based on the structure sketched above. On the basis of fairly crude estimates, the institutions can be divided as follows:

*Table 2: Survey of the attainment of systematic quality assurance procedures after two rounds of audits.*

	Planning	Implementation	Monitoring	Evaluation/ Improvement
Number of institutions	11	12	6	4

These figures corroborate the results and conclusions presented in the publication *How did things turn out? The National Agency's Quality Audits and Evaluations 2001*. But even though they do not seem to indicate any major progress as after two audits two-thirds of the institutions are still considered to be in the first two phases of the introduction of a quality assurance system, thorough examination of the reports reveals that virtually all the institutions have nevertheless improved their quality assurance procedures. This even applies to the institutions that today are considered still to be in the initial planning phase and that during the first round were unable to demonstrate any real quality assurance procedures. Some institutions can report considerable progress and among them can be found both large universities and smaller higher education institutions. In cases where a negative development can be discerned, this is often the result of organisational changes at the institution that have not yet had time to settle down or that the systematic quality assurance procedures reviewed in the audits have been given a low priority in the institution's development strategies.

### **What do the conclusions mean?**

In preparation for the second round of audits, the National Agency produced in 1998 a publication entitled *Follow-up Quality Audits of Universities and University Colleges*. This publication made it clear that during this second round of audits the National Agency expected the higher education institutions to have established quality assurance procedures on a more general footing and also to have developed systems to enable regular review of their operations and the introduction of improvements.<sup>6</sup> After eight years of quality audits we can now determine that only one-third of Sweden's higher education institutions live up to these expectations in being able to demonstrate fully, or almost fully, developed quality assurance systems. In view of the ambitions described above, this outcome must be regarded as unsatisfactory. At the same time, as has already been pointed out, nearly all the institutions audited – with one or two exceptions – have made progress between the first and second audit. How can these relatively paradoxical conclusions be interpreted? Why does it seem so difficult for the institutions to demonstrate systematic quality assurance procedures? Has the level of ambition been placed too high? Or have the questions perhaps been wrongly formulated?

One question is whether it is possible to identify any critical factors that seem to be decisive for stable and sustainable quality assurance procedures *over time*. In studying the reports that describe institutions that by the second audit had well-developed quality assurance routines it is interesting to note

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6. Fortsatt granskning och bedömning av kvalitetsarbetet vid universitet och högskolor (Follow-up Quality Audits of Universities and University Colleges), p. 17.

that the assessors emphasise the importance of the enthusiasm and advocacy of individuals in the institution's governance structure, such as Vice-Chancellors or Pro-Vice-Chancellors. This would then mean that quality assurance – like so many other things – is highly dependent on individuals and therefore also extremely vulnerable. This could in its turn explain why it is so difficult for the institutions to *create systems* for quality assurance that can guarantee stability over time.

Another way of problematising the outcomes and conclusions presented here could be to focus attention on the basis of the National Agency's own evaluation. The model applied by the National Agency in its quality audits is based on a theoretical structure that comprises *goals-operations-outcomes-evaluation/improvement*.<sup>7</sup> This model could also be described as being based on two important premises about quality assurance:

1. If all four components exist, an institution is considered to possess completely acceptable quality assurance procedures.
2. If the four components follow one after the other, the institution's quality assurance procedures are considered to be systematic.

The audit model used by the National Agency therefore seems to prescribe that continual improvement is achieved by the application of systematic procedures in a predetermined order. This point of view explains why most audit reports look more or less the same and why their recommendations are, on the whole, similar from one round to the next. This of course gives rise to a whole series of questions. How much scope does the model applied by the National Agency in its audits provide for “being different”? Is too much weight perhaps being given to systematisation? And what may be ignored with a focus like this? Is it possible for institutions to achieve continual improvement on the basis of quality assurance procedures that deviate from the prescribed model?

The cases in which the issue of uniformity manifests itself and comes to a head have involved programmes in the creative arts. The panels of assessors auditing institutions offering these subjects testify to a totally different type of quality culture and a different approach to quality, which deviates in many respects from one that is strictly academic and which has led to complications in auditing these institutions. But the issue of the risk of uniformity and of unchallenged premises about quality assurance has been a subject of discussion ever since the beginning of the audits and applies not only to programmes in the creative arts.

It is important to stress that quality assurance and improvement may be achieved in several different ways, even if the Agency's audits have been conducted using the theoretical structure referred to above.

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7. See also the previous discussion about the four phases of quality assurance.

### **The future of quality audits**

In the light of the collective experience of quality audits and after consultation with the Ministry of Education, the National Agency has decided that during the period in which the first round of evaluations of subjects and programmes is taking place the higher education institutions will not be required to submit further reports on their quality assurance procedures to the Agency. The National Agency does not consider it fruitful to repeat the audits for a third time but believes that the reports provide in themselves an adequate basis for the institutions to implement their own internal quality assurance measures. The National Agency plans instead to launch certain thematic evaluations. At the moment it is following up the thematic evaluation of the activities of the institutions with regard to student influence, gender equality and social and ethnic diversity.



# Evaluations of subjects and programmes 2002 »

## Background

Since 2001 the National Agency has been entrusted by the government with the task of evaluating within a six-year period all the programmes that lead to the award of a general or vocational qualification. These evaluations comprise both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. In principle, the evaluations have three aims: to contribute to quality development at the department or the equivalent, to monitor whether the programmes comply with the goals and regulations laid down in the Higher Education Act and Higher Education Ordinance and also to provide information for students and others involved in making a choice of programme. These evaluations consist of three stages. The first stage requires the institutions responsible for the programmes to submit their own self-evaluation. This is followed by an external assessment which includes a site visit. Finally the results of the evaluation are followed up. These evaluations focus on both the conditions that apply to the programmes on offer and to their implementation and results.

## How have these evaluations developed? In what way is their quality assured?

Unceasing reflection on the methods used for the evaluations and different ways of assuring the quality of the process is important and axiomatic for the National Agency. Methodological development and quality assurance is based on advice and recommendations received from the National Agency's international advisory group and in the course of seminars and special studies focusing on particularly important issues.

## The international advisory group

The National Agency's international advisory group, "The Advisory Board", continues to monitor the National Agency's evaluation procedures. This group consists of five internationally eminent researchers in this field.<sup>8</sup> The National Agency has published a report containing the advisory group's opinions on the way in which the quality evaluations are developing.<sup>9</sup> These opinions

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8. 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 (Center for Higher Education Policy Studies, Netherlands) and International Association of Universities and Bente Kristensen, Copenhagen Business School.

9. The National Reviews of Swedish Higher Education. Report by the International Advisory Committee to the National Agency for Higher Education in Sweden.

are based partly on the published evaluation reports and the meta evaluation initiated by the National Agency of how the higher education institutions and the assessors experience the evaluation process<sup>10</sup>, and also on discussions with the National Agency's staff. Examples of the opinions expressed by the advisory group are that clearer instructions should be given about the institutions' self-evaluations and that better use could be made of experiences from the quality audits in the evaluations of subjects and programmes.

The National Agency revises the instructions for the self-evaluations every year. These now focus even more explicitly on encouraging the institutions to express their own reflections and evaluations. In addition, the amount of statistical information required has been reduced. The reports from the quality audits are included in the documentary material provided to the assessors for the evaluations of the subjects and programmes. The instructions for the self-evaluations also raise questions about how the work of the departments or their counterparts in assuring and developing quality in undergraduate programmes is related to the overall quality procedures of the higher education institution as a whole. Determining how the quality audits and the subject evaluations can be combined to form one single process will form an important part of the National Agency's future methodological development.

A new meeting of the advisory group took place during the spring of 2003.

#### **Seminars with staff responsible for quality assurance**

During the year, the National Agency has taken the initiative of arranging a seminar for staff responsible for quality assurance or quality co-ordinators at the institutions which have been subject to the evaluations of subjects and programmes. These seminars will continue to take place once a year. The next seminar will be based on the responses to a number of questions sent to these individuals about the changes within their institutions resulting from the quality audit system. Contact with staff responsible for quality assurance is an important source of information about how evaluation models are perceived at the higher education institutions and what role they play.

#### **Students in the centre**

The student perspective is central to the National Agency's evaluations. Student issues are given prominence in the questions raised in the self-evaluations, the panels contain student members and during site visits the assessors invariably interview students. In order to provide the information that students want and need, a student information service has been developed at [www.studera.nu](http://www.studera.nu). One seminar has been arranged with undergraduate and

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10. Karlsson, O., Andersson M. I. och Lundin, A., *Metautvärdering av Högskoleverkets modell för kvalitetsbedömning av högre utbildning. Hur har lärosäten och bedömare uppfattat modellen? (A meta evaluation of the National Agency's model for quality appraisal in higher education. How have institutions and assessors perceived the model?)*.

postgraduate students who have participated as assessors in the National Agency's evaluations and quality audits.

At this seminar it became clear that the undergraduate and postgraduate student representatives felt that they enjoyed the respect of the panels and had every opportunity of voicing their questions and standpoints. The reception they have received from the higher education institutions has not always been as positive, but the students were then given great support by the panels of assessors. The roles played by students in the panels have varied from concentrating on student perspectives to involvement in every aspect of the evaluation. The special role of postgraduate students was also discussed. One problem may arise from the closeness of their relationships with individuals associated with the subject under review. For small subjects one possible change might be to recruit a postgraduate student representative from another Nordic country. In the panels of assessors involved in the evaluations during 2002 this has been applied with good results. At the seminar it was also pointed out that the undergraduate and postgraduate students who had acted as assessors had formed the impression that the students they met during the site visits had in many cases been badly prepared and had not contributed a great deal, either, to the self-evaluations of their departments. At the moment the National Agency is participating in a Nordic project which is looking into similar questions more closely – both the participation of students as assessors in evaluations and also their involvement in self-evaluation processes. The results of this project will be published later this year.

One survey that supplements the quality evaluations is the comprehensive questionnaire survey, *Through Student Eyes*.<sup>11</sup> Here the responses of the students are interpreted in the light of the underlying objectives of higher education. A majority of the students do not consider that their education contributes to their personal development, social commitment or understanding of other groups in the community. There are, however, major variations from programme to programme. Despite shortcomings in the attainment of these objectives, most students are pleased with their programmes and the institution at which they are studying.<sup>12</sup> During 2003 the results of another major questionnaire survey, *Through Postgraduate Student Eyes*, will be published.

### **Positive and negative criticism**

The introduction of the new quality evaluation system has of course given rise to both positive and negative criticism. The evaluations contribute to the quality development of the institutions themselves but they can also be seen as a threat because of the risk that the right to award degrees may be called

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11. *StudentspeglIn 2002 (Through Student Eyes 2002)*.

12. The report *Läraryundersökningen 2003 (Teacher survey 2003)* provides an account of how teachers consider the objectives of programmes are achieved.

into question. Quality evaluations also involve a great deal of work for the institutions in many cases. What then has been the subject of the positive and negative criticism?

One positive reaction has been based on the fact that these reviews are national and help to give an impression of what is going in a subject in the country as a whole. The evaluation model used by the National Agency is appreciated: a uniform and recognised model with external assessors. The evaluation process is considered to be stimulating and attention is drawn in particular to the value of the self-evaluations. It is also emphasised how important it is for the evaluations to identify areas where improvements are needed.

Negative points of view mainly concern the time and resources that have to be devoted to the self-evaluations. Another question raised is who the assessors really represent: are they subject experts or the representatives of various stakeholders? Another question mark is what is actually being evaluated: is it the programmes in a subject or the way in which the departments operate? In this connection it is pointed out that problems can arise when evaluations have several aims or are addressed to different groups of readers.

Some of the criticism questions the evaluation model itself. In order to provide more substance for this discussion, the National Agency commissioned a paper from an external expert on evaluations. In it the author claimed that the National Agency's evaluations do not pay sufficient attention to the outcomes of the programmes in the form, for instance, of the quality of students' term papers, students' perceptions of their programmes and whether the students meet the requirements of the labour market.<sup>13</sup>

To what extent this criticism is justified depends on what is meant by outcomes and how much weight is ascribed to various forms of outcome. The National Agency's model is based on a holistic approach involving appraisal of both the circumstances in which programmes are offered, their implementation and their outcomes. These three elements are of equal importance and the findings can also refer to circumstances and processes.

The National Agency's quality appraisals are based on course evaluations, examinations, term papers and other surveys and in the instructions for the self-evaluations questions are raised, for instance, about surveys of alumni. Aspects studied by the assessors include the choice of subjects for term papers and theses, their extent and level.

### **Innovations**

The current procedure for the evaluation of subjects and programmes enables the institutions under review to check the factual accuracy of the descriptive sections of the panel's report. A few months after publication of the report,

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13. Nilsson, Karl-Axel, Enklare och nyttigare? Om metodiken för ämnes- och programutvärderingar (Simpler and more useful? On methods of evaluating subjects and programmes).

a feed-back seminar is arranged with the higher education institutions. This provides an opportunity for discussion of the process and the outcome of the evaluation, for instance, with the assessors.

During the past year in one case another feed-back system for the higher education institutions was tested. For economic history a meeting was arranged between representatives of the institutions and the assessors at which the entire report was discussed before it was published. One proviso that must apply to any discussion of outcomes during the course of the evaluation process is that only general issues may be raised and not specific programmes. The presentation of the evaluation report on economic history is also organised on a more thematic basis.

During the evaluation of history, a special survey was made of the subjects chosen for doctoral theses during the last five years. This survey provides a picture of the development of postgraduate programmes and the subject as a whole in recent years and indicates any parametric changes that may have taken place.

Another evaluation project in which a new evaluation model was tested was for the subject of social work. Here the evaluation was not restricted to undergraduate and postgraduate programmes but also included research in the discipline. This evaluation was carried out in collaboration with the Swedish Council for Working Life and Social Research (FAS).<sup>14</sup>

### **International experiences**

The panels of assessors for the evaluations of subjects and programmes have always contained international assessors, usually from the Nordic countries. The National Agency also monitors national and international developments in the field of evaluation, for instance through its participation in the Nordic and European networks. The Agency has taken part in a Nordic project intended to examine a model for the accreditation of the evaluating bodies. The results of this project can be found in a report discussed at a seminar arranged by ENQA (The European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education).<sup>15</sup> The National Agency is also involved in the international discussion of accreditation. The content of the concept of accreditation has been explored by a joint working group consisting of representatives from The Association of Swedish Higher Education and the National Agency.<sup>16</sup> In addition the Agency is taking part in an international research project on accreditation in Europe that is administered from CHEPS (Center for Higher Education Policy Studies) in the Netherlands and the University of Kassel. During the year two

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14. At the same time as the evaluation took place an enquiry requested by the government has been undertaken by the National Agency for Higher Education which consisted of a review of training programmes in social care and social work.

15. A Method for Mutual Recognition. Experiences with a method for mutual recognition of quality assurance agencies.

16. Ackreditering. En öppen fråga (Accreditation – an open question).

reports have been published by an international evaluation project, LUMA, in which the National Agency and a number of higher education institutions are participating. Two subjects, Mathematics and Chemistry, have been evaluated simultaneously in Sweden, Finland and Hungary.<sup>17</sup>

### **The composition of the panels of assessors**

During 2002 a total of 11 evaluations comprising 264 appraisals were undertaken. In all, 130 assessors have participated in the panels for the various evaluations. In arranging the panels the National Agency devotes a great deal of effort to recruiting more women as assessors. Even so, there is a gender imbalance. As the table shows, of the 130 assessors, 49 were women, i.e. 39 per cent. However, if the individual panels are examined, several panels consisted of equal numbers of women and men. Of the 130 assessors 24 were undergraduate and 15 postgraduate students. A total of 17 could be characterised as representing the labour market. Among the subject experts 54 per cent were international experts.

Compared with previous years, considerably more women postgraduate students acted as assessors. Another difference is that more of the assessors came from the smaller higher education institutions. However, the major difference is that there were a larger number representing the labour market. In 2001 there were only 2 such representatives, during 2002 there were 17. They can mainly be found in the evaluations of programmes leading to the award of qualifications in engineering, but several of the panels evaluating other subjects also contained representatives of the labour market.

*Table 3: Composition of the panels of assessors.*

Assessor, category	Women	Men
Chairpersons	4	7
Other assessors (apart from undergraduate and postgraduate students)	27	53
Undergraduate students	11	13
Postgraduate students	7	8
Total	49	81

### **The participation of representatives of the labour market and professional organisations**

The participation of representatives of the labour market in the panels of assessors provides one way of taking into account the opinions of future employ-

17. The trilateral cooperation initiated by the government for the development of programmes in mathematics and the natural sciences – LUMA.

ers and other professional organisations that may be concerned. Another has been to invite them to the feedback conferences that conclude each evaluation. At the feedback conference on the evaluation of business administration there was, for instance, a special item on the agenda “Training in business administration from the point of view of future employers” with representatives of potential employers of various kinds. In addition representatives of Civil-ekonomerna (the Professional Association of Economists) and Sveriges ekonomföreningars riksorganisation (the National Association of Economists) participated. Experience has shown the value of including representatives of this kind in the panels of assessors. In some cases the higher education institutions subject to review have emphasised the importance of the inclusion of labour market representatives. However, there have been times when it has been difficult to recruit these representatives.

## What do the evaluation reports show?

### Which programmes have been evaluated?

The table below shows the evaluations that have taken place during 2002 and how many appraisals each evaluation has comprised. All in all 264 appraisals were made during the year<sup>18</sup>.

*Table 4: Number of evaluations/appraisals.*

Evaluation/subject/degree	Number of appraisals
Certification of marine engineers or deck officers	4
Classical archaeology and Egyptology	10
Archaeology	14
History	29
Economic history	10
Environmental science, environmental engineering and environmental and health protection	31
Chemistry	26
Social work and qualifications for social workers	27
Slavic languages and east and central European studies	9
Baltic and Celtic languages	4
Programmes in engineering	100
<b>Total</b>	<b>264</b>

18. Although the evaluations were conducted in 2002, all the reports but two were published in 2003. (For the reports see References). The evaluation of undergraduate and postgraduate education in a subject at an institution is seen as two evaluations. The evaluation leading to the award of qualifications in engineering comprised 100 programmes, including master's programmes.

## **An analytical summary**

### **Small subjects – survival of the fittest**

A common characteristic of small subjects such as the Slavic, Baltic and Celtic languages, classical archaeology, Egyptology and certain aspects of archaeology, is that they offer very vulnerable milieux with few students and are sustained by few or even solitary teachers. Even though praise for the work of each of these teachers is unstinting and the small scale is often appreciated by their students for the closeness and the informal contacts it fosters, the milieux are often neither critical nor creative enough. Students need to encounter several teachers with different perspectives, to be exposed to discussion in various seminar groups and to participate in formal contexts during the course of their programmes. It should be added that dependence on specific individuals and vulnerability can also be found in large subjects.

Where languages are concerned conditions vary greatly. The differences in size of these subjects reflect the availability of teachers and student demand for the programmes offered and not the political importance of a language or its use by groups of immigrants in Sweden. However, the labour market has an indirect impact on the languages that are offered. Enlargement of the EU eastwards could lead to an increase in the demand for interpreters to and from Slavic languages, which could affect student interest. Currently, however, there is a risk that the smallest Slavic languages will be closed down, if the only institution in Sweden that offers them feels that it can no longer afford to keep them. This would mean the disappearance of Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian as a subject of academic study in Sweden even though it is one of the country's important minority languages.

### **Sound history**

History is regarded as being a well-managed subject and it often forms part of a stimulating critical and creative milieu. On the whole the scholarly and teaching qualifications of its teachers are high and there is a great interest in research among all categories of teachers at both the universities and the other higher education institutions. The students also consider that their studies develop their interest in society and that their programmes make them independent and critical. There is great interest in studying history, greater among women than men, and large numbers of students enrolled in first and second semester programmes. The number continuing to further study is however limited and at more advanced levels and among teachers men predominate, with the exception of a few institutions where there are even numbers of women and men.

Enrolment to economic history, which is a young subject with its roots in history and various aspects of economics, has been declining in recent years and follows the normal pattern with few students at more advanced levels. The programmes maintain a high standard and are taught on the whole by

well-qualified teachers. However, research links and gender perspectives need to be increased in undergraduate courses and more women teachers need to be appointed. As a certain tendency to profile programmes can be discerned in the balance between history and economics and between quantitative and qualitative methodology at some departments, a great deal could be gained from national cooperation on postgraduate programmes.

### **Chemistry – nowadays an ancillary subject**

In recent years the chemical industry has been able to show consistently higher growth figures than Swedish industry as a whole and so far it has not been difficult for students to find work. Nevertheless, programmes in chemistry have problems in recruiting students and this could in the long term pose problems for the Swedish chemical industry. What is particularly worrying is that there seems to have been a grave decline in interest in programmes for chemistry teachers and this could well have consequences in the relatively near future.

Teacher training programmes play a very small role in what goes on at chemistry departments at most higher education institutions. The numbers completing these programmes will in no way fulfil the need forecast by the National Board of Education of 120 newly qualified teachers of chemistry per year until 2010.

The qualifications of the teachers at these departments are very high and most of the teachers have doctoral degrees and fulfil the requirements for appointments to a professorship. However, teachers could well be in short supply in the not too distant future, as industry may entice many of them with the offer of better conditions of employment than they will enjoy in higher education. Postgraduate students say that they intend to take positions in industry when they have completed their programmes. Sweden shares this lack of interest in chemistry with other countries.

The number of full-time equivalents in chemistry in Sweden has nevertheless not declined to any great extent during the last five-year period, which may seem paradoxical in view of the decline in enrolment figures in programmes in chemistry and chemistry teaching. At the same time there has been a rise in the number of students applying for the new bio-specialisations and to vocationally oriented programmes such as pharmaceutical science and pharmacy in which chemistry is a required subject. In this way chemistry has assumed the characteristics of an ancillary subject.

### **The environment – a broad subject with a vague identity**

Environmental science, environmental engineering and environmental and health protection are young subjects that have emerged from traditional disciplines: environmental science and environmental and health protection from the natural sciences and environmental engineering from technology and traditional programmes in engineering. The rapid developments that have taken place in this field, in which finding solutions to complex environmental

problems requires broad and multidisciplinary scholarship, has made it difficult for these subjects to acquire any clear identity of their own. This applies in particular to environmental science, in which many programmes were launched during the 1990s. Added to the requirements of breadth and multidisciplinary studies are demands for study in greater depth and progression.

Pressure for places is declining in most parts of the country, which is linked to excessive provision in environmental programmes with a natural sciences focus. Only a few higher education institutions offer environmental programmes with a social science basis. Among other things, the panel of assessors advises supplementing the programmes and the introduction of more distinct and more clearly explicit profiles. This is important for both potential students and future employers.

### ***Social work – a young but well-established subject***

The evaluation of social work was carried out in coordination with the Swedish Council for Working Life and Social Research (FAS) which has had the task of evaluating the research in the subject for which it provides funding. This means that good insights have been achieved into the terms on which postgraduate programmes are offered and the conditions that apply for postgraduate students. Social work is a subject that is characterised by the wide field it encompasses and the breadth of the scope it offers for research. This should be seen in the light of the great expectations in the community that research and educational programmes will be influenced by problems encountered in social work in practice, so that they can be of benefit to the social workers in their everyday work. As there are 25,000 qualified social workers in Sweden, it is remarkable that so few opt to continue their studies at more advanced levels. Altogether, the wide range of master's programmes offered in the subject in Sweden fails to recruit more than a hundred or so students every year.

### ***Vocational qualifications – based on scholarly research and tried and tested experience?***

The vocational qualifications that have been evaluated are those awarded in engineering, the certification of marine engineers or deck officers and qualifications for social workers. They also include the nationally recognised programmes preparing environmental and health care inspectors, even though these are not classified as vocational qualifications in the Higher Education Ordinance.

The Higher Education Act stipulates that all higher education is to be based on scholarly research and tried and tested experience. This means, for instance, that there should be links between programmes and current research, that the teaching staff should represent both the links with research and tried and tested experience and that theory and practice should be integrated in a meaningful way. In a number of instances the teaching staff on the vocation-

ally oriented programmes reviewed do not fulfil these requirements or alternatively there are no functioning links with research.

Experience from the vocational areas for which these programmes offer training is regarded by both the students and representatives of the labour market as important. Questions about the extent to which work placement should be included and how it can be arranged have not been resolved satisfactorily in many quarters. Students may not be obliged to undertake work placement sessions for which credit points are not awarded, even though this is currently the case in many of the programmes evaluated. Work placement opportunities are few and far between so that the higher education institutions often approve arrangements that have little connection with the programmes or take place when they are almost completed with the result that the experience has little genuine effect.

That too little is demanded is an opinion that is expressed repeatedly by both students and assessors of many of the vocationally oriented programmes.

*Programmes in engineering (högskoleingenjörutbildningar)* are arranged by 25 higher education institutions, offering about 200 different programmes, which can be compared with the programmes for marine engineers or deck officers offered by only two institutions and the programme in environmental and health protection offered at one. In an attempt to attract new students it is very common for programmes to be subdivided and provided with some fashionable prefix such as “design” or “media” which is reflected no more than marginally in their content. There are however programmes that have been created on the basis of the demands of a specific sector for greater specialisation in, for instance, environmental engineering, graphic techniques and silviculture. Many higher education institutions also offer the possibility of taking a bachelor’s or master’s degree in engineering or technology. Regrettably, however, what the differences are between these degrees has not always been determined, which is unfortunate from the point of view of the students, the labour market and when making international comparisons. A number of programmes considered by the panel of assessors to be excellent in themselves were not felt to correspond to the requirements for the engineering qualification awarded. Moreover these programmes offered students only limited possibilities of taking supplementary courses to qualify for the award of a master’s degree in engineering, as they do not offer adequate basic studies in the natural sciences and technology.

*Programmes offering qualifications for social workers* have become more attractive in recent years and the higher education institutions entitled to award these qualifications have increased the number of places on offer. A number of other institutions have also applied for the right to award these qualifications. There is a great deal of pressure on the places offered in these programmes in most areas of specialisation and women predominate among the students. The programmes offering training for social work have a greater

capacity than many other higher education programmes to live up to the goal of greater diversity of recruitment. Students are recruited from a broader social base and the proportion of students with immigrant backgrounds has risen in recent years. Specialisations are offered in social work in a multicultural environment or with an intercultural or international focus.

When these programmes were evaluated three years ago students claimed that too little was demanded of them. A number of improvements have been made but many students would still like the programmes to be more challenging.

### **General observations**

#### ***Lack of resources***

Scrutiny of the evaluations undertaken in 2002 reveals that most of the general observations made in 2001 recur. As in the previous year, attention is drawn to the lack of resources, and evidence is presented in the form of the heavy workloads of the teaching staff, the reduction in the number of contact hours and lack of time for in-service training or skill enhancement. Redundancies or the threat of redundancies were said to be one outcome of the lack of resources.

The deterioration in funding also results in many cases in a major reduction of the time spent by students on laboratory work or in workshop activities, which has serious consequences for programmes in chemistry and engineering. The lack of resources also has an impact on maintenance and can prevent new investment to replace obsolescent laboratory equipment. This applies in particular to undergraduate programmes in chemistry at the older higher education institutions. There are, however, examples of increased laboratory time being offered in connection with the development of new research activities.

#### ***Profiles, collaboration, concentration – repeated themes***

A large number of programmes have been launched in the environmental area and in engineering which are often marketed as being new in order to attract students. Not infrequently these programmes are offered for groups of 10-20 students. However, it transpires that many of them are not particularly novel, or alternatively that too many similar programmes are launched, and this raises the question of whether resources are being used effectively or if the number of places on offer may not be excessive. In view of these observations, together with the major scarcity of resources and the problem of compensating for study milieux that are not large enough, once again the recommendations made last year regarding profiles, collaboration and concentration are repeated. There are a remarkable number of comments suggesting that either the lack or inadequacy of cooperation characterises subjects offered in small milieux, and these include many postgraduate programmes. There is a particular need for the engineering programmes to cooperate on norms for the course requirements in bachelor's programmes. The higher education

institutions also need to collaborate with companies in devising effective methods of strategic cooperation.

In this context it is, however, important to point out that new experiments are being made with different forms of collaboration. At one arts faculty, for instance, new departmental groups are being organised in which relatively autonomous departments collaborate on administrative issues and share the same chair and board.

### ***Working conditions for teaching staff***

It is made clear throughout that no change for the better has occurred in the working conditions for teachers since last year. Heavy teaching loads with in most cases large and heterogeneous groups of students at the lower levels are encountered repeatedly. In many cases there is a conspicuous lack of teachers with doctoral qualifications. The heterogeneous student groups and their inadequate pre-entry knowledge for programmes in history, chemistry, engineering and the environment pose difficult teaching problems. These are the circumstances that increase the pressure on the teachers. And like last year, there are increasing administrative requirements. Even though the overall picture is relatively unambiguous, there are one or two exceptions in which working hours have been allocated in ways that are more suitable for the teachers. One institution regularly provides the possibility for teachers with a doctorate to take a term off for research. Other studies have come to similar conclusions on the heavy workloads for teachers. Nevertheless, the majority of teachers enjoy their work and appreciate being able to influence their own schedules and duties.<sup>19</sup>

The teachers are expected to take an active role in the National Agency's evaluations of subjects and programmes, which means, among other things, that time has to be set aside for the self-evaluations prepared by the departments or their equivalents. In this context, the National Agency would like to emphasise the importance of the budgetary allocations by the higher education institutions to create a real possibility of devoting time to this work. There is widespread testimony that the self-evaluations are felt to be extremely rewarding because of the involvement of teachers and students and that they play an important role in a department's own quality development.

### ***Conditions vary for postgraduate programmes***

In view of the limited size of the milieux in which postgraduate programmes are offered in a number of subjects and the particular difficulties experienced by certain subjects in obtaining external funding, the higher education institutions are recommended to extend their cooperation in some cases to

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19. See also *Läroundersökningen 2003* (Teacher survey 2003) and *Allt samtidigt! Åtta journalisters perspektiv på högskolan* (All at once! – higher education from the point of view of eight journalists).

comprise the other Nordic countries. Joint courses, which could take advantage of different disciplinary profiles, would provide one way of reducing the lack of courses and supervisors in postgraduate programmes.

Adapting to the 1998 reform of postgraduate programmes has meant that the conditions applying to these programmes vary a great deal for the students. These differences can be large even within one and the same department. Different forms of financing doctoral studies lead to very different economic conditions for postgraduate students. There can be different requirements about the extent of a thesis when taught courses can account for anything from 30 to 50 of the credit points awarded in a subject. Although strong links with the institution's own undergraduate courses, in the formulation of entry requirements for instance, may help to raise throughput figures they can also be a drawback in reducing the mobility of postgraduate students. This should be considered in the light of the general recommendations of the assessors that more mobility among postgraduate students is desirable.

In the case of social work it is possible to determine that there is very little scope for newly qualified doctors with a bent for research to make it their career. Altogether there are only five post-doctoral posts in social work in Sweden as a whole. The panel of assessors considers that this is probably the case in many more subjects and comes to the conclusion that the number of postdoctoral posts needs to be raised.

Despite the differences in their conditions, on the whole postgraduate students are satisfied with their studies and their working conditions. Freedom in the choice of their thesis subjects is appreciated. However, the postgraduate students who enjoy the best conditions are those studying in active, vital research milieux and who can turn for support to both supervisors, other researchers and postgraduate students. The circumstances of postgraduate students who are not incorporated into a research milieu are considerably more limited.

### ***Student influence and course evaluations***

In formal terms, student influence works well in most cases, in the sense that students are represented in official contexts. However, in this year's evaluations the students consider, particularly in small milieux, that informal influence is preferable. Where there are good contacts with teachers no formal influence is felt to be needed. At the same time the students are often unaware of both their rights and their obligations, and this also finds expression in the numerous contacts students make with the National Agency in writing and by telephone.

Today course evaluations are frequent. However, there are few course evaluation systems that function systematically so that results are fed back to the students, filed in the departments and the necessary changes introduced. There are often shortcomings in communication and the feed-back of information to students about the changes made. Many teachers maintain that

the students lack interest in course evaluations, which could be a result of inadequate feed-back. Course evaluations form an important aspect of quality assurance procedures and the commitment of teachers or directors of studies plays an important role in how well they function.

### ***Equality of opportunity and gender perspectives***

The predominant pattern with a preponderance of women in undergraduate programmes and more men at more advanced levels survives. For instance, in programmes in engineering, the proportion of women teachers is only about 15 per cent. History, however, is a subject where examples can be found of an even balance of women and men teachers. Greater focus on gender perspectives can be seen in several programmes and in theses in history. On the other hand there are few instances of gender perspectives in engineering programmes. More needs to be done, in particular in subjects where for many years the gender balance has been even in undergraduate programmes without this leading to a more even distribution of men and women among lecturers and professors. There are examples of attempts being made to reverse this trend and use of what is known as the 10 per cent 'free' quota to encourage men to apply for the programmes for social workers in which women predominate.

### ***Internationalisation***

The task entrusted to higher education of providing research and education is by its very nature an international one. In the field of chemistry extensive international cooperation is taking place and this has benefited postgraduate programmes in chemistry. Virtually all of the postgraduate students are offered a chance to participate in international conferences and are increasingly enabled to spend part of their programmes studying abroad. Some of the chemistry departments involved in the National Agency's evaluation have also taken part in a trilateral cooperative project concerning mathematics and the natural sciences involving Finland, Hungary and Sweden. The results of this project confirm that programmes in higher education in all three countries are of a high standard.

In environmental science relatively extensive international cooperation is also taking place, which is necessary in view of the transnational nature of environmental problems. Links between the local and the global, between developing and developed countries, like those between international conventions and national legislation are also reflected in these programmes. Where internationalisation in the form of teacher and student exchange is concerned, it can be seen that in some subjects these exchanges are sparse, which to some extent can be ascribed to the nature of the subjects or the programmes. There are, for instance, very few students elsewhere who are interested in studying Slavic languages in Sweden. International exchange can also be complicated by the composition of student populations, as is the case with students on

social work programmes, who are older than average, often have children and also have jobs while they study.

With regard to engineering programmes, it can be observed that even though international exchanges are arranged by some higher education institutions, on the whole there is no tradition of international contact. In view of the increasing internationalisation of Swedish industry, qualified engineers need to be prepared to work with and in other countries.

Another aspect of internationalisation is the supply of courses offered in English, which are required to arouse the interest of foreign students in studying in Sweden. There is room for development here. It is also important for the higher education institutions to adopt a generous approach to the accreditation of credit points for incoming students.

### ***Right to award degree called into question more often***

In cases when an evaluation results in the conclusion that a programme does not fulfil minimum academic standards, the National Agency for Higher Education is empowered to review the right to award a degree. The higher education institution concerned must remedy shortcomings within a year of publication of the report. Otherwise the right to award the degree is revoked.

It is greatly to the credit of Sweden's higher education institutions that the vast majority of programmes evaluated in 2002 maintain a good standard. This notwithstanding, the right to award degrees has been called into question more frequently this year, in 38 cases as opposed to 8 in 2001. Most of these cases involved engineering programmes, a total of 25, an additional 7 leading to the award of a bachelor's degree and 2 master's programmes. Doubts arose about whether they fulfilled the requirement for the award of engineering qualifications because of the lack of either sufficient mathematics or technology. It is important to point out here that it was only qualifications in engineering that were questioned, while other programmes at the same higher education institutions were of good quality.

The other cases which gave rise to doubts about the right to award degrees concerned an additional three bachelor's programmes and one master's programme that either failed to offer the depth and breadth required in the subject or alternatively a milieu that could be considered sufficiently critical or creative.

# What changes have the quality evaluations contributed to? »

Can anything be said already about what changes the quality evaluations have helped to bring about? The feed-back conferences arranged a few months after the publication of each report provide information about changes that have been introduced even though a relatively short period has elapsed. These conferences also provide an opportunity to circulate examples of good practice from one higher education institution to others. The action plans that have been requested also testify to changes. In order to acquire even more information, in the autumn of 2002 the National Agency posed a number of questions to the staff responsible for quality assurance or quality coordinators at all of the higher education institutions. The questions concerned the ways in which the new quality evaluation system had affected the treatment of quality assurance issues at the institutions. The responses to the National Agency contain some comments on the difficulty of determining which changes are a result of the new quality evaluation system and which would have been introduced anyway.

Nevertheless, there are many good examples of the contribution of evaluations to quality enhancement. Many respondents confirm this, and in particular they refer to the importance of the self-evaluations.

The responses from those working with quality assurance contain many examples of how the institutions deal with these issues. Several point out that the National Agency's evaluation model with its six-year cycle now provides the framework for their institution's own quality assurance procedures. Examples are also given of how responsibilities for quality assurance have been allocated at central levels in the institutions and how this central unit or contact person is involved in the various phases of the evaluations: preparation, implementation and follow-up of the results. Once again confirmation is provided of the importance of the self-evaluations as the point of departure for an institution's internal quality development. At departmental level the concrete changes may involve merging subjects, monitoring student experiences, the production of key figures, the establishment of new management structures, the introduction of special programmes for the recruitment of lecturers or intensification of endeavours to raise the numbers of degrees awarded.

The changes embodied in the action plans may comprise the appointment of more teaching staff, increased cooperation between higher education institutions, initiating national seminars for postgraduate students or national subject conferences, and also plans to terminate a programme.

The National Agency's evaluation model involves monitoring the results of an appraisal about three years after publication of the report. The evaluations that took place in 2001 will not be followed up until 2004. Then it will be possible to present a fuller picture.

One general conclusion from the quality audits and the evaluations of subjects and programmes is that they have helped to create increasing awareness of quality issues and increasingly methodical quality assurance procedures. Quality assurance procedures, for which the responsibility previously often rested at governance level, are now permeating to the departments as a result of the evaluation of subjects and programmes. This provides a good platform for continued quality development in the institutions.

# What remains to be done? »

Most of the programmes evaluated during 2002 maintain good standards of quality. Several of the problems that had already been noted during the preceding year recur. These relate to lack of resources and the heavy workloads of the teaching staff, the problems of small subjects, declines in the enrolment catchments of a number of programmes, disparate conditions for postgraduate students and course evaluations that do not function as intended.

To deal with the problems brought to light by the evaluations, the panels of assessors provide a large number of recommendations, mainly directed to the departments although others are addressed to faculties or the higher education institutions as a whole. Certain problems are structural in nature and require changes in the system. Each level is therefore expected to take its responsibility for the measures that need to be adopted and for making improvements. Proposals about how departments and institutions can cope with the lack of financial and staffing resources and how they can strengthen small milieux are expressed in the reports in broader and more general terms. Stress is laid on the importance of increasing cooperation both within and between higher education institutions, of making strategic assessments about the adoption of profiles and of concentrating small programmes to specific institutions. This is easy to say, but often concerted efforts are required and they are not always easy to coordinate in practice in a decentralised system.

## **What can be done at the national level?**

The National Agency can provide a platform for various kinds of meetings and seminars with different groups at which problems such as those referred to above can be discussed at a national level. The Agency can also, when requested by the government, undertake specific and focused information initiatives and provide data on various issues.

The Agency intends to initiate discussions with the Council for the Renewal of Higher Education on the needs of the higher education institutions for support to develop cooperation on postgraduate programmes.

The National Agency has also noted that in the vast majority of cases the higher education institutions are not dealing with course evaluations in the manner laid down by the Higher Education Ordinance. The Agency considers that the institutions should be allowed a few years to develop course evaluation procedures that comply with these requirements before a more extensive study is undertaken by the Agency in its supervisory capacity. During

2003, however, the National Agency intends to follow up the previous thematic evaluation of how the institutions are working with student influence, equality of opportunity and social and ethnic diversity. This includes course evaluations as one aspect of student influence.

The proposal that a profile should be adopted is often countered by representatives of the higher education institutions with the argument that there are no financial incentives. The current system of areas of research favours the kind of development that involves gradual progression from university college status, with undergraduate teaching, to that of a university with postgraduate teaching and research. The question of profiles in a systems perspective raises questions of the need of both economic and other incentives. Initiatives of various kinds are required and proposals must be submitted and tested.

The question of concentration also needs to be explored. Here, it is appropriate for the government to take an initiative. It is not only the situation of small languages that needs to be investigated. The problems also apply to other areas of higher education where a further basis for the development of national strategies is required.

Various forms of cooperation are recommended in most of the evaluation reports. The national graduate schools initiated by the government are positive examples. More measures of this kind and other kinds which may lead to increased cooperation among institutions should be considered.

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## Quality audits

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