

Report 2011:18 R

External Review of the Evaluation Activities of the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education

Self-evaluation report



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External Review of the Evaluation Activities of the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education: Self-evaluation report

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Foreword

The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education was subject to an external review of its evaluation activities in 2005 under the auspices of NOKUT (The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education). The review concluded that the Agency complied with the ENQA standards in all essential respects. Consequently, the Agency's full membership of ENQA was reconfirmed in 2006.

In accordance with ENQA's requirements for quinquennial reviews for continued membership, the Agency has taken the initiative of undergoing an external type 'A' review again in order to demonstrate its continued compliance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. NVAO (The Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders) has kindly agreed to coordinate the exercise.

Since the 2005 review the quality assurance activities of the Agency have undergone several changes. In 2010 the Government instructed the Agency to develop a new model for the assessment of first and second-cycle courses and programmes, focusing on student attainment of the learning outcomes specified in the Higher Education Ordinance. The model, which was launched in 2011, retains the elements required by ENQA such as self-evaluation, site visits and a public report and leans heavily on peer review. It was developed by the Agency in cooperation with representatives of the higher education institutions, students and the social partners.

The recent development activities have made us reflect on and rethink several of our previous assumptions about quality assurance, while still retaining the basic formulae. We see this review as an important aspect of the quality assurance of our own work and a step towards further improvement.

This self-evaluation report was prepared by a group in the Department of Quality Assurance. It was discussed at two seminars in the Department as a whole as well as at a meeting with the management level at the Agency. Comments from other departments have also been solicited and taken into account. We are now looking forward to feedback from the panel assigned to review the Agency's quality assurance activities.

Lars Haikola
The University Chancellor

Maria Sundkvist
Head of the Department of
Quality Assurance

Background

The Swedish Higher Education System

The overall responsibility for higher education in Sweden rests with the Riksdag (Parliament) and the Government. These decide on the regulations applying to the higher-education area. They also determine objectives, guidelines and the allocation of resources for the area. The Ministry of Education and Research is responsible for issues relating to higher-education institutions, research, adult education and student aid. The public-sector higher education institutions are public agencies that are accountable to the Ministry. Other agencies, such as the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (hereafter referred to as the Agency) and the Swedish Research Council are also accountable to the Ministry of Education and Research.

Universities and university colleges

All higher education is offered by public-sector universities and university colleges (högskolor) or by independent course providers that have been granted degree-awarding powers.

There are 14 public-sector universities and 20 public-sector university colleges. In addition there are three independent higher education institutions entitled to award third-cycle qualifications: Chalmers University of Technology, the Stockholm School of Economics and Jönköping University Foundation. There are also nine independent course providers entitled to award first-cycle, and in some cases second-cycle, qualifications as well as five course providers entitled to award qualifications in psychotherapy.

The Riksdag decides which public-sector higher education institutions are to exist.

The mission of the higher education institutions

The mission of the higher education institutions is to offer education based on an academic or artistic footing and proven experience. They must also undertake research and artistic development work as well as other development work. In addition the higher education institutions must cooperate with their surrounding communities and provide information about their operations.

The central regulations that govern the way in which higher education institutions operate are contained in the Higher Education Act, enacted by the Riksdag, and the Higher Education Ordinance, which is laid down by the Government.

Within the framework of the regulations and parameters determined by the Riksdag and the Government, the higher education institutions enjoy great

freedom to decide how to organize their operations, use their resources and conduct their courses and programmes.

Allocation of resources to higher education institutions

The Riksdag decides on funding for the higher education institutions. Resources are allocated to the institutions for first and second-cycle courses and programmes on the basis of the number of students admitted to each cycle, expressed in terms of full-time equivalents, and the number of credits attained (annual performance equivalents). A small portion of the funding will also be allocated on the basis of the results of the Agency's evaluations as from 2013.

The direct funding for research and third-cycle courses and programmes is based mainly on past allocations, but 10 per cent of the funding and new resources are allocated on the basis of two quality indicators. These are citations and research funding from external sources.

The regulations that govern higher education institutions

Public-sector higher education institutions are agencies in their own right that are directly accountable to the Government. They are subject to the Higher Education Ordinance (Annex 1), which is laid down by the Government and linked to the provisions of the Higher Education Act (Annex 2). It contains fundamental regulations about courses and programmes in the different cycles and stipulates freedom of research. Annex 2 to the Higher Education Ordinance contains the descriptors for all qualifications (Annex 3).

As government agencies, the higher education institutions are also subject to administrative and labour-market legislation and the provisions of the Instrument of Government.

Degree-awarding powers

In order to be able to award a specific qualification, the institution organizing a programme – whether it is accountable to the state or independent – is required to have degree-awarding powers, i.e. special permission to award this particular qualification. Universities are entitled to award first, second and third-cycle general qualifications.

The public-sector university colleges have a general entitlement to award Higher Education Diplomas, Bachelor's degrees and 60-credit Master's degrees. They can also be entitled to award 120-credit Master's degrees and third cycle qualifications in various fields after appraisal by the Agency. Those granted entitlement to award third-cycle qualifications within a specified field are also entitled to award second-cycle general qualifications in the field specified.

In the case of first and second-cycle professional qualifications and qualifications in the fine, applied and performing arts in every cycle, both universi-

ties and university colleges have to apply to the Agency for degree-awarding powers.

Independent course providers have to apply to the Government for degree-awarding powers. This is also the case for the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences and the National Defence College. The qualifications that may be awarded are listed in the National Qualifications Ordinance.

The structure of programmes and qualifications

Cycles

All courses, programmes and qualifications are ascribed to one of three cycles: first, second and third. There is a progression, i.e. each cycle is based on the former. The formal requirements that distinguish these cycles are specified in the Higher Education Act.

All first- and second- cycle educational offerings consist of courses. Students may combine these courses to form programmes.

Cycle	Entry requirements	Cycle descriptor
First cycle	Final school grades or corresponding knowledge	<p>Develop the students':</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ability to make autonomous and critical appraisals • ability to identify, formulate and solve problems preparedness to cope autonomously with changes in professional practice. <p>Within the field covered by their studies the students will, in addition to their knowledge and skills, develop the ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • search for and evaluate knowledge at an academic level • keep up to date with the development of knowledge • discuss their knowledge, even with individuals who have no specialist insights in the field.
Second cycle	First-cycle programmes or corresponding knowledge	<p>Students shall acquire specialized knowledge, skills and capacities in relation to first-cycle programmes by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • further developing their ability to integrate and apply knowledge autonomously • developing their ability to deal with complex phenomena, issues and situations • developing their potential for employment that demands great autonomy or for research and development work.
Third cycle	First and second-cycle programmes or corresponding knowledge	Develop the knowledge and skills required to undertake autonomous research

Higher-education credits

An academic year that comprises 40 weeks of full-time study corresponds to 60 credits. The number of credits awarded for each course is determined by the amount of study normally required to attain its objectives.

The credits awarded in higher education in Sweden can be compared with European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) credits, where 60 credits are attained after one academic year of full-time study.

Categories of qualifications

There are five categories of qualifications:

- General qualifications, first cycle: Higher Education Diploma, Bachelor
- General qualifications, second cycle: 60-credit, 120-credit, Master
- General qualifications, third cycle: Licentiate, Ph.D.
- Qualifications in the fine, applied and performing arts at Bachelor's, Master's and Licentiate/Ph.D. level
- Professional qualifications at Bachelor's and Master's level.

See National Qualifications Framework (Annex 4).

Professional qualifications are awarded mainly in the regulated professions (e.g. teaching, medicine, engineering) on the basis of the appropriate requirements.

Introduction to the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education

Status and Organization

The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education is a government agency under the Ministry of Education and Research. It is funded by the Government but formally independent of the Ministry and the Government like other Swedish state agencies. Thus, the Minister for Education is not allowed to interfere in evaluation processes.

The head of the Agency is the University Chancellor, Dr. Lars Haikola, who has the overall responsibility for all its activities. There is an advisory board appointed by the Government, which enables it to monitor the activities of the Agency. The board, which meets at regular intervals, gives advice to the University Chancellor but has no formal decision-making powers.

Quality assurance of higher education in Sweden is one of the main tasks of the Agency, but it is also responsible for a number of other areas, as described below. There are seven departments, each handling one or several tasks entrusted to the Agency. To coordinate activities and support the University Chancellor, there is a senior advisor and an administrative office with a staff of six, headed by Lennart Ståhle, Head of the University Chancellor's Office. Further support for the University Chancellor is provided by a management team comprising representatives from the University Chancellor's Office and the heads of the departments.

The Government recently appointed a committee of inquiry with the brief of reorganizing the structure of three of the agencies responsible for higher education and reducing their number to two. The functions of the Agency will remain, but their organizational context will change. Quality assurance will continue to be a major function in the new structure. The new organization is expected to take effect from 1 January, 2013.

Today the Agency consists of the following departments:

Department of Higher Education Analysis

The department monitors and tracks developments within the higher education sector, primarily at the national level but also internationally. The department carries out government assigned investigations, analyses and evaluations and is responsible for higher education statistics in Sweden. It is also responsible for certain issues related to admission to higher education, especially regarding entry requirements and selection criteria for higher education entrants, as well as for developing the Swedish Scholastic Aptitude Test for higher education. The department has a staff of 24.

Department of Communications

The department presents comprehensive and unbiased information about higher education studies in Sweden, circulates information about the results of work undertaken by the Agency and plays a particularly important role in publishing the results of evaluations and other quality assurance activities. It is further responsible for motivating young people to study at higher education institutions. The department has a staff of 15.

Department of Legal Affairs

The department inspects higher education institutions to ensure their compliance with legislation and regulations and ensures the legality and quality of the Agency's regulations. It further provides administrative support and legal expertise to the Board of Appeals and the Suspensions Board. The department has a staff of 14.

Department of Qualifications Recognition

The department is the Swedish ENIC-NARIC office and recognizes higher educational qualifications from other countries, for use in the labour market. It supports higher education institutions and others with the expertise required to accredit higher educational qualifications from abroad. It is also the contact point for Directive 2005/36/EC on the recognition of professional qualifications and responsible for applying international directives and conventions regarding the accreditation of qualifications. The department has a staff of 24.

Department of Quality Assurance

The main functions of the department, are to evaluate the quality of first, second and third-cycle programmes and examine entitlement to award first, second and third-cycle qualifications. The Department of Quality Assurance is by far the largest unit of the Agency in terms of staff and budget. It is also, as will be evident from the ensuing historical overview, the unit that has experienced the most far-reaching changes in the course of its history, although throughout its existence, it has retained one main function: appraising applications for entitlement to award new qualifications. The department is divided

into three units. It has a staff of 32 and a considerable number of experts are engaged for its assessments.

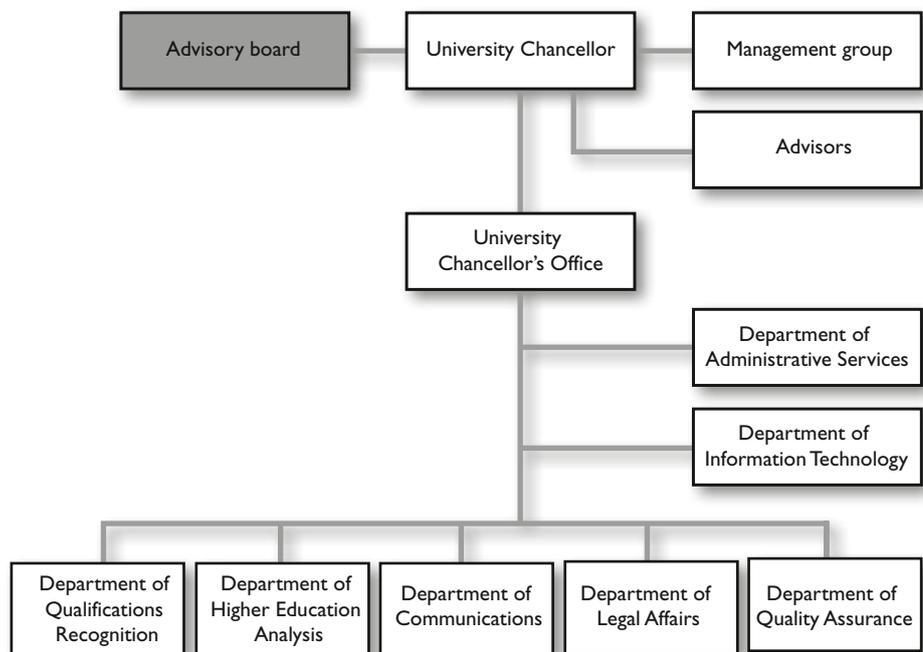
To support the development of the new quality assurance system and monitor its implementation, a reference group consisting of representatives of universities, the Association of Higher Education, the National Union of Students and the social partners has been formed. There is also a scientific council consisting of highly qualified Swedish and international researchers and practitioners in the field of evaluation, which was appointed in 2011. It monitors the introduction and function of the new quality assurance system and gives advice for further development.

The Department of Administrative Services and the Department of Information Technology

These two departments provide support to the specialist departments. They have a staff of 11 and 12, respectively.

While each of the specialist departments deals primarily with the areas for which it is responsible, the knowledge and expertise available in the Agency as a whole comprise a strength which can be utilized throughout the organization. Thus, the Department of Quality Assurance may avail itself of information and advice provided by experts within, for example, the Departments of Legal Affairs and Analysis.

Organizational Chart of the Agency



Decision-making

The University Chancellor meets regularly with a management group consisting of the members of his Office and the Heads of Department to discuss pol-

icy issues and other matters of importance. He has, however, sole responsibility for all formal decisions taken in the name of the Agency. Items for decision are presented at weekly meetings by those in charge of the various projects, and after discussions, official decisions are taken.

Finances

The activities of the Agency are funded by the Riksdag as part of the State budget. In the current fiscal year, the Agency has a total budget of 187 million SEK, of which 51 million SEK is allocated to the Department of Quality Assurance.

National and international cooperation in quality assurance

The Agency interacts with national stakeholders in the field of higher education. For example, there are meetings with the Ministry of Education and Research and the Association of Higher Education. The University Chancellor has regular meetings with advisory groups of vice-chancellors, representatives of the National Union of Students and representatives of the social partners. Additionally, there is a reference group and a scientific council consisting of national and international researchers and practitioners in quality assurance who meet from time to time.

The Agency is a member of ENQA, INQAAHE (International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education) and NOQA (Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education) and participates in working groups and projects within the framework of ENQA and ECA (European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education). The Agency also participates in activities organized by EAIR (the European Association of Institutional Research).

Historical overview of quality assurance activities

1995–2001

The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education was established in 1995. This involved merging several existing institutions, one of which was the Office of the University Chancellor (1993–95), which had developed the first generation of quality assurance in higher education in Sweden. The model was based on the concept of the quality audit and focused on quality assurance processes at the higher education institutions. It dealt with the strategies, objectives, approaches, plans, systems, methods and organization used by the individual institutions to assure the quality of all their activities.

Parallel to the audits, a system (appraisal of entitlement to award qualifications) of accreditation of all Master's programmes planned by university colleges and all programmes to be introduced by private higher education insti-

tutions was already in place and administered by the Office of the University Chancellor. It is still part of the national quality assurance procedures.

With the establishment of the Agency, Sweden acquired a single government organization for a number of the most important aspects of higher education administration, one of which was quality assurance managed by what was then called the Department of Evaluation.¹ Thus, the Agency took over from the Office of the University Chancellor the implementation and further development of the two six-year cycles of audits as well as appraisals of applications for entitlement to award degrees. During this period, too, a number of programme evaluations were carried out, generally on the basis of indications of problems and/or poor quality.

2001–2007

From 2001 and onwards, programme and subject evaluations became the predominant form of quality assurance carried out by the Agency in accordance with an Act of Parliament and a government decision, while at the same time the quality audits were temporarily being phased out. A six-year plan was developed, covering all general and professional Bachelor's, Master's, Licentiate and Ph.D. programmes offered by universities, university colleges and independent providers. Altogether, almost 1,700 appraisals were conducted within 76 subject areas, the most comprehensive comprising engineering and technology, which accounted for 100 appraisals and the caring sciences and medicine 136 appraisals.

Simultaneously, a model of thematic evaluation of higher education institutions was developed and implemented, focusing on how well the higher education institutions dealt with specific aspects of quality, such as gender equality, internationalization and student influence. Experts in each area nominated the institutions that excelled. Altogether, more than 170 appraisals were made during these years.

During the same period the applications for entitlement to award qualifications continued as before, and a total of 156 appraisals were made.

2008–2010

As the 2001–2007 cycle was drawing to a close, preparations were made for the 2007–2012 cycle. Plans were developed for the following components of a revised quality assurance system:

- Modified audits of quality procedures at the higher education institutions. These were intended to involve both institutional leadership and a selection of faculties and departments to determine the effectiveness of the system.
- Evaluations of programmes, selected on the basis of an overall national survey of major subject areas.

1. The most notable exception is admission to higher education, which is the responsibility of the Swedish Agency for Higher Education Services.

- A continuation of appraisals of the entitlement to award degrees adapted to the new Qualifications Ordinance based on the Bologna principles.
- Thematic evaluations and thematic studies
- Centres of Excellence

Considerable experience was gained during the planning phase, and the system was in operation for two years.

The current structure and organization of quality assurance

Appraisal of entitlement to award qualifications

Appraisal of entitlement to award qualifications is concerned with determining whether a programme (qualification) planned by a particular higher education institution meets reasonable requirements in terms of the quality and quantity of teaching resources, learning environment, infrastructure and documentation with regard to financial resources, teaching, examination and course literature. The institution must also have a quality assurance system which guarantees the quality of its provision in place. Since this is an appraisal *ex ante*, there is a follow-up after a certain number of years (as part of the regular programme evaluation system). The decision on entitlement is made by the Agency. The procedure is the same for private course providers, except that the decision is made by the Government after considering the advice of the Agency.

Higher education institutions apply to the Agency for the right to award general or professional qualifications. In addition, university colleges apply to the Agency for the right to award 120-credit Master's degrees and Ph.D. degrees. Independent course providers and self-governing higher education institutions apply for degree awarding powers for all first (University Diploma and Bachelor) and second (Master) cycle programmes.

The application

A higher education institution submits an application for entitlement to award a qualification for a particular study programme. This includes a self-evaluation with details of the programme specification and teaching staff and other requested documentation.

Panel of assessors

The Agency appoints a panel of assessors. The panel assesses the quality of the study programme on the basis of the documentation submitted. Meetings with the higher education institution are always undertaken, at which discussions take place with different groups which usually include the vice-chancellor, the subject or study programme coordinator, teachers and students.

Decision

The panel of assessors presents its opinion and proposal for a decision to the Agency. If the institution is a public authority, the Agency then makes a decision about its entitlement to award the qualification. If the institution is independent and self-governing, the view of the panel of assessors and the Agency's proposal for a decision are submitted to the Government.

The evaluation model 2011–2014

As a result of the findings presented in a report by a public committee of enquiry, the Government presented a bill (*Fokus på kunskap – kvalitet i den högre utbildningen* [*Focus on knowledge – quality in higher education*]), which was enacted by the Riksdag in June 2010. One important conclusion was that higher education institutions must be granted greater autonomy. Among other things, they were to take full responsibility for the development and quality assurance of their activities. The task of the national quality assurance system for which the Agency is responsible would then, according to an analysis made by the Ministry of Education and Research, focus on the outcomes of courses and study programmes and assess whether students achieve the outcomes specified in the Higher Education Ordinance.

In its directive the Government instructed the Agency to develop and produce a quality assurance system for all first- and second-cycle courses and programmes leading to the award of a qualification to be based on the students' attainment of the learning outcomes specified in the Qualifications Ordinance, which is part of the Higher Education Ordinance. The evaluations were to provide a basis for review of the entitlement to award a qualification (i.e. what may be referred to as re-accreditation) and also for the Government's allocation of a small proportion of funding.

Third-cycle courses and programmes are also to be evaluated, but the results are not to lead to any extra funding from the Government.

The system for the evaluation of first and second-cycle courses and programmes has now been in operation since the beginning of 2011. As before, it builds on peer review, i.e. on the conclusions drawn by experts in the various fields evaluated. In contrast to the models applied earlier (see above), however, the focus of the new assessments is almost exclusively on results, not on pre-requisites and processes. Four different assessment factors are taken into account, the most important being the students' independent projects. The other three are self-evaluations submitted by the higher education institutions, questionnaires sent to alumni and the experience of existing students, as expressed in group interviews, for instance.

Students' independent projects

The reform of the system of qualifications introduced the requirement of an independent project (degree project) for the award of virtually all qualifications, as one way of confirming that students have achieved the intended outcomes.

In the national quality assurance system, assessment of a selection of independent projects is important to ascertain student attainment in relation to intended outcomes as indicated in the Qualifications Ordinance. This appraisal is not a review of individual students but a means of assessing the results of a study programme on the basis of the outcomes laid down in the relevant qualification descriptors. It is the aggregate quality of a programme's independent

projects that is to provide the basis of the evaluation and not specific excellent or poor productions. Thus, it is an important part of the process, as it is a clear indication of the extent to which students have attained the expected academic outcomes.

The importance of these projects varies between the different programmes, however, and they are sometimes relatively minor, which must be taken into account in the evaluations. In these cases the other assessment materials, especially the self-evaluations become more important.

The higher education institutions' self-evaluations

The self-evaluations submitted by the higher education institution serve two purposes. The first is to enable a broader and more comprehensive presentation of outcomes than a selection of independent projects can offer. In their self-evaluations, therefore, the institutions should present, analyse and assess the outcomes attained in relation to all the outcomes to be taken into account in the evaluation. They should include specific evidence that outcomes are attained rather than references to plans, conditions and processes. Some of these may, however, be presented to demonstrate how the institution guarantees student attainment of these outcomes.

Secondly, it is essential to account for and explain circumstances that have manifest significance for the results of a programme, e.g. the qualifications of teachers and their availability, as well as students' preconditions.

In cases where few independent projects are available or where they play a minor role in the programme, the self-evaluation becomes proportionately more important.

Students' experiences

Students' experiences are collected in interviews with students approaching the end of their studies. The aim is to find additional evidence regarding the extent to which the programme contributes to their attainment of its intended outcomes as indicated in the Higher Education Ordinance. In cases where there are too few students available, interviews will not be carried out.

Alumni questionnaires

Questionnaires for alumni are intended to provide answers about whether a programme attains the outcome of usefulness in the labour market. They may also provide information about whether those now employed consider that they attained the intended outcomes.

The questionnaires are sent primarily to those who graduated two years prior to the evaluation, who can be assumed to have gained labour market experience, while at the same time their studies are not too distant.

A three-level scale for the overall assessment

The overall assessment of an evaluation will be presented using a three-level scale:

1. *Very high quality: the study programme displays a very high degree of achievement of outcomes*
2. *High quality: the study programme displays a high degree of achievement of outcomes*
3. *Inadequate quality: the study programme displays serious shortcomings.*

Study programmes that display serious shortcomings must be given some time to remedy them (Higher Education Act, Chapter 1, Section 14). If a re-evaluation one year later reveals that these shortcomings still persist, the Agency may decide to revoke the entitlement to award a qualification. As far as independent providers are concerned, such a decision must be taken by the Government after hearing the Agency. These providers are given the same opportunity to remedy shortcomings before a final decision is made.

A small proportion of the higher education budget provided by the Government will be reserved for institutions with programmes that display a very high degree of achievement. This funding will be made available as from 2013, after the results of the first four-year cycle have been presented.

Weighting the different assessment material

As mentioned above, the students' independent projects are to provide most of the material on which the overall assessment is based. However, some outcomes cannot be assessed on the basis of these projects but other factors will have to be taken into consideration. These are accounted for in the self-evaluation report provided by the institution. The relative weighting is different for different programmes. One factor which could be taken into consideration is student circumstances that have a manifest impact on the outcomes of a programme. It is then, however, necessary for the higher education institution to show, in its analysis, that these factors have had a decisive impact on these outcomes.

The views expressed in the alumni questionnaires and the interviews conducted with students should also be taken into account, particularly in cases where appraisal of the independent projects offer no clear guidance in assessing how well outcomes have been achieved.

The evaluation process

The composition and work of the assessment panels

Evaluations are carried out by external assessment panels that include three categories of assessors: subject experts (peers), students and practitioners. The panel should as a whole have the breadth and expertise to enable appraisal of all the outcomes laid down for the courses and study programmes to be evalu-

ated. The Agency endeavours to maintain a gender balance in the assessment panels as well as representation of experts from other countries. The higher education institutions are encouraged to nominate subject experts. Practitioners are nominated by appropriate social partners, students by the student unions. The decision on who to include in an assessment panel is, however, made by the Agency.

The Agency has taken steps to assure the quality of the evaluation process by developing explicit principles and routines for the panels. These apply, for instance to regulations concerning possible conflicts of interest. It is also important to provide the experts with information and an introduction to the evaluation process to ensure equivalence and transparency.

The first task of the assessors is to draw up a proposal on the outcomes to be evaluated as well as evaluation-specific criteria for the appraisal based on a fixed number of outcomes, which is then submitted to the Agency before the start of the evaluation. After amendment by the Agency, if required, this proposal is sent to the higher education institutions and discussed at a start-up meeting with representatives of the courses and programmes to be evaluated, who are given every possibility of commenting on the outcomes and criteria. The Agency then decides which outcomes are to be included in the evaluation as well as the criteria to be applied.

Coordination meeting

In order to demonstrate the relevance of the courses and study programmes to the labour market it is important that labour market representatives are involved in the evaluation. This is made possible partly through the inclusion of practitioners in the assessment panels (see above) and partly through coordination meetings with other practitioners arranged by the Agency. These meetings include discussion of the outcomes in the qualification descriptors for the courses and study programmes to be evaluated. The panel is provided with a summary of what has been said at the coordination meeting.

Appraisal of the material

Once the selection of outcomes and criteria has been determined, the Agency circulates guidelines on how to organize the self-evaluations and submission of independent projects. Representatives of the courses and study programmes to be evaluated are responsible for ensuring that the anonymized independent projects and self-evaluations are submitted to the Agency and the Agency is responsible for making the material to be appraised available to the assessors.

Site visits

Site visits are intended to enable the assessment panel to pose supplementary questions to those representing the programme to be evaluated and to discuss any lack of clarity in the material on which the evaluation is based. In this way, the site visits offer greater penetration of the programmes evaluated and

help to ensure that the final judgement is firmly based. Site visits are therefore scheduled to take place towards the end of the evaluation process and after the assessment panel has been able to appraise the different kinds of material at their disposal. If the panel members have no questions to the study programme, the site visit may be cancelled.

Site visits play a more subordinate role than in the previous audit and evaluation systems used by the Agency.

The panel's report and the Agency's decision

The panel submits its overall assessment of each study programme to the Agency using the three-level scale. This evaluation must clearly indicate how well the students are considered to have achieved the outcomes evaluated. The grounds for each evaluation must be provided by the panel.

On the basis of the assessment panel's report, the Agency reaches a decision on the overall assessment to be awarded to each programme of study. Those that are given the overall assessment of *Very high quality* or *High quality* are considered to have attained the quality standards for higher education. Those that fail to attain the required standards are given the evaluation *Inadequate quality*, in which case the Agency extends the higher education institution's entitlement to award the relevant qualification conditionally. These programmes will then be reviewed within the following year before the Agency decides whether or not the entitlement should be revoked completely.

Compliance with the ENQA membership criteria

Compliance with ESG for the external quality assurance of higher education

ESG 2.1 Use of Internal Quality Assurance Procedures

STANDARD:

External quality assurance procedures should take into account the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the European Standards and Guidelines.

GUIDELINES:

The standards for internal quality assurance contained in Part 1 provide a valuable basis for the external quality assessment process. It is important that the institutions' own internal policies and procedures are carefully evaluated in the course of external procedures, to determine the extent to which the standards are being met. If higher education institutions are to be able to demonstrate the effectiveness of their own internal quality assurance processes, and if those processes properly assure quality and standards, then external processes might be less intensive than otherwise.

COMPLIANCE:

Appraisal of *entitlement to award a qualification* involves assessment of how a higher education institution can guarantee the quality of the programme it is planning. This means that different aspects of quality are examined, such as the teaching expertise available, the educational setting in which the programme will be offered as well as the concrete routines that exist to assure the programme's quality (Annex 6).

For programmes subject to the *national quality evaluation system*, the outcomes are the primary aspect. The recent reform of higher education gives the higher education institutions greater self-determination over their operations. These must maintain a high standard, but the higher education institutions are allowed a greater degree of control over how this is ensured. This means, for instance, that their own internal quality assurance procedures as well as the prerequisites for the implementation of their programmes are discussed in relation to student attainment of outcomes.

The Agency has undertaken three rounds of evaluation of quality procedures at the higher education institutions (1995–98, 2001–02, and 2008–09). These revealed a gradual rise in the level of maturity, which has led to the current focus on programme outcomes. The results that have transpired from the new evaluations offer, however, a clear indication of how the higher edu-

cation institution's own quality procedures function and it is incumbent on each institution to develop these procedures in an appropriate way. Development of a joint quality assurance process for the higher education institutions is currently being discussed in the Association of Swedish Higher Education (SUHF).

ESG 2.2 Development of external quality assurance processes

STANDARD:

The aims and objectives of quality assurance processes should be determined before the processes themselves are developed, by all those responsible (including higher education institutions) and should be published with a description of the procedures to be used.

GUIDELINES:

In order to ensure clarity of purpose and transparency of procedures, external quality assurance methods should be designed and developed through a process involving key stakeholders, including higher education institutions. The procedures that are finally agreed should be published and should contain explicit statements of the aims and objectives of the processes as well as a description of the procedures to be used. As external quality assurance makes demands on the institutions involved, a preliminary impact assessment should be undertaken to ensure that the procedures to be adopted are appropriate and do not interfere more than necessary with the normal work of higher education institutions.

COMPLIANCE:

The government directives to the Agency from July 2010 (Annex 7) include guidelines on the design of the new quality evaluation system for first and second-cycle programmes. As already pointed out, these state that it is the outcomes of programmes that are to be evaluated and how, in some respects, this is to be done. In addition they stipulate that the evaluations are to be undertaken by external experts, what material the evaluations are to be based on, that the students' independent projects are the most important material, that, if necessary, site visits are to be made to the programmes being evaluated, that each programme is to be evaluated at the appropriate level (first and second cycle) and that the evaluations shall conclude with an appraisal that uses a three-level scale. On the basis of these guidelines the Agency reached a decision on the new quality assurance system on 21 December 2010 (Annex 5).

Stakeholder involvement

The Agency has developed its *quality evaluation system* in collaboration with stakeholders. In practice this has taken the form of recurrent meetings with an external reference group, open meetings with referral bodies, pilot studies and continual information about methodological development on the Agen-

cy's website. The Government was also informed about the development work. The decision on the final form to be taken by the system was, however, made by the Agency (the University Chancellor).

The quality aspects used by the Agency in its appraisals of applications for *entitlement to award qualifications* have been devised in consultation with the higher education institutions. These aspects are general ones and comprise interpretations of the provisions of the Higher Education Act and Higher Education Ordinance. Specific quality aspects have been produced for certain appraisals. For example, in collaboration with representatives of higher education institutions the Agency has drawn up a document with guidance on appraisals of applications for entitlement to award 120-credit Master's degrees as well as for applications for third-cycle programmes. (Annexes 8 and 9).

External reference group

The Agency has a reference group for the quality evaluation system that consists of representatives of the higher education institutions, the Association of Swedish Higher Education (SUHF), the Swedish National Union of Students (SFS) and representatives of the social partners (see p. 11 as well). This group meets regularly and submits opinions on different aspects of the emerging evaluation system and also discusses methodological issues.

Meetings with referral bodies

To extend consultation beyond the reference group three meetings were arranged in 2010 with referral bodies at different places in Sweden. The Agency invited a large number of representatives from all of the higher education institutions. At these meetings the ideas behind the new evaluation system and the envisaged model were presented. During the meetings participants were able to ask questions and express opinions. Questions from these meetings were collected and presented on the FAQ page on the Agency's website. A summary of opinions was made and taken into account in the continued methodological development work. One direct outcome of the opinions expressed at these meetings was the decision by the Agency to replace the quality aspects on which evaluations were to have been based with the qualification descriptors laid down in the Higher Education Ordinance.

Pilot studies

During the development of the new evaluation system a number of methodological groups were established in which the staff of the Department of Quality Assurance played active roles. One important element in the methodological development was the use of pilot studies to test different aspects of the evaluation process. The Agency engaged experienced supervisors/examiners from several different programmes to test, for instance, methods for assessing independent projects. These tests also comprised professional qualifications in which independent projects account for a relatively small proportion of

the programme. One result is that the self-evaluations of the higher education institutions have been given greater weight in the evaluation of these programmes.

The Agency further undertook pilot studies involving the questionnaires to students and alumni to find out how different kinds of questions were perceived. Tests were also undertaken of how student interviews can be conducted in practice.

Information on the Agency's website

The Agency's website (www.hsv.se/qualityassurance) offers detailed descriptions of the evaluation process, in both quality evaluations and appraisals of applications for entitlement to award qualifications. On the Swedish version of the website (www.hsv.se/kvalitet) there is also a page with questions and answers about the quality evaluation system for 2011–2014 as well as the timetable for current evaluation rounds and the dates of the start-up meetings with representatives of the higher education institutions.

Publication

The Agency has produced several documents to support the project managers, assessors and higher education institutions (see list of references). We should like to draw particular attention to the manual for project managers, which is intended, among other things, to make evaluations more similar. The production of this manual has also formed part of our internal quality assurance process.

The Agency's website contains information about the appraisal of applications for *entitlement to award qualifications*. This provides instructions about submitting the application and the quality aspects on which appraisals are based. There are also specific guidelines on applications for entitlement to award 120-credit Master's degrees, degrees in education, third-cycle degrees and degrees in the fine, applied and performing arts (Annexes 8, 9 and 10).

Impact assessment

In developing its methodology the Agency has taken pains to ensure that quality evaluations are appropriate and that they do not cause undue interference with the day-to-day operations of the higher education institutions. In planning and developing the system and in discussions with representatives of the higher education institutions, therefore, particular attention has been paid to making sure that the evaluations do not place a greater load on the higher education institutions than necessary. One outcome is that the Agency has developed a web-based system for registering the self-evaluations and independent projects. Another example is that interviews (site visits) will be conducted with the assistance of ICT.

Transparency has been an important concept in producing and implementing the new quality evaluation system. Our impression is that we have been

able to live up to our aims for transparency. This demands a great deal of work, however, from the staff of the Agency and the assessors early in the evaluation process. More time is devoted to providing information about and gaining the backing of the sector for important elements in the process.

ESG 2.3 Criteria for decisions

STANDARD:

Any formal decisions made as a result of an external quality assurance activity should be based on explicit published criteria that are applied consistently.

GUIDELINES:

Formal decisions made by quality assurance agencies have a significant impact on the institutions and programmes that are judged. In the interests of equity and reliability, decisions should be based on published criteria and interpreted in a consistent manner. Conclusions should be based on recorded evidence and agencies should have in place ways of moderating conclusions, if necessary.

COMPLIANCE:

The Agency has been given the task of evaluating the outcomes of programmes. This takes the form of an assessment by the Agency of the degree to which students (and therefore programmes) attain the outcomes laid down nationally in the qualification descriptors (qualitative targets) which may number anything from 8 to 24, depending on the nature of the programme. The point of departure for the evaluations, the national qualitative targets, are therefore predetermined and known to both the higher education institutions and the Agency. To limit the workload required by the evaluations, it is the task of the panels of assessors to make a selection of the qualitative targets to be included in the specific evaluation. This enables the panel to focus on the targets it considers important for the evaluation it is undertaking. Support for this task is provided by a number of guidelines for the panel to bear in mind that has been produced by the Agency (Annex 11). When this selection has been made, the panel of assessors works out criteria for each qualitative target included. At the beginning of an evaluation a “start-up meeting” is held with the programmes concerned. At this meeting the higher education institutions are given a chance to express opinions about the targets and criteria selected by the panel of assessors. The Agency then decides on the targets and criteria to be used for evaluation. This decision is published on a special website, HSV Direkt. This website also provides the higher education institutions with general information about the self-evaluation process in a document entitled *General guidelines for self-evaluations in the Agency’s quality evaluation system 2011–2014* (Annex 12) as well as a template for self-evaluations. HSV Direkt also provides space for the panel of assessors to comment on its selection of targets. All of this together helps to ensure transparency of the evaluation sys-

tem in which the higher education institutions are provided with as explicit tools as possible.

Applications for *entitlement to award qualifications* are appraised by the Agency on the basis of the provisions of the Higher Education Act and Higher Education Ordinance. The point of departure for these appraisals consists of the targets laid down by the Government for each qualification in the national qualification descriptors. The appraisal therefore answers the question of whether the programme planned will offer students the conditions required to attain the targets for the qualification concerned. The aspects and criteria for these appraisals are presented in a document on the Agency's website (Annex 6). Special guidelines on applications for entitlement to award 120-credit Master's degrees, degrees in education and in the fine, applied and performing arts, as well as third-cycle degrees have been produced along with the relevant aspects and criteria.

In order to ensure parity in these appraisals, applications for entitlement to award the same qualification are appraised as far as possible together, and the assessors involved meet jointly under the same chair.

ESG 2.4 Processes fit for purpose

STANDARD:

All external quality assurance processes should be designed specifically to ensure their fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for them.

GUIDELINES:

Quality assurance agencies within the EHEA undertake different external processes for different purposes and in different ways. It is of the first importance that agencies should operate procedures which are fit for their own defined and published purposes. Experience has shown, however, that there are some widely-used elements of external review processes which not only help to ensure their validity, reliability and usefulness, but also provide a basis for the European dimension to quality assurance. Amongst these elements the following are particularly noteworthy:

- 1. insistence that the experts undertaking the external quality assurance activity have appropriate skills and are competent to perform their task;*
- 2. the exercise of care in the selection of experts;*
- 3. the provision of appropriate briefing or training for experts;*
- 4. the use of international experts;*
- 5. participation of students;*
- 6. ensuring that the review procedures used are sufficient to provide adequate evidence to support the findings and conclusions reached;*
- 7. the use of the self-evaluation/site visit/draft report/published report/follow-up model of review;*
- 8. recognition of the importance of institutional improvement and enhancement*
- 9. policies as a fundamental element in the assurance of quality.*

COMPLIANCE:

Experts

The panels in the Agency's *quality evaluations* consist of three categories of assessors: subject experts, students and representatives of the social partners and must as a group possess the kind of competence that will enable evaluation of all the targets included in the programmes to be evaluated. The Agency endeavours to avoid an uneven gender balance in the panels. One aim is that 60–40 per cent of those chairing the panels in each round of evaluations should be women. In addition, experts from other countries must be represented, but as understanding of spoken and written Swedish is required, these assessors are mainly drawn from the other Nordic countries.

The support documentation makes it clear how it is ensured that the competence of the panel corresponds to the programmes and qualitative descriptors to be assessed (Annex 13).

The subject experts must have a sound academic/artistic and professional reputation, teaching expertise, legitimacy in the sector and personal integrity. For the sake of legitimacy panels should be chaired by a professor.

The Agency's panels of assessors always include students. They should be approaching the end of their first or second-cycle studies in the main field of study or professional programme and preferably have some experience of acting as an elected representative on a student body. They do not take part in the assessment of the independent projects but otherwise have the same role as the other members of the panel. Students are also represented in the Agency's reference group for quality evaluations as well as in the Agency's Advisory Board.

The representatives of the social partners may, for instance, be active practitioners in the sector concerned or should have experience and insight into the programmes to be evaluated. They may be individuals who recruit graduates from these programmes or who work in a relevant sectorial organization.

The panels of assessors are appointed by the Agency. Before subject experts are recruited proposals are invited from the higher education institutions on who to include in the evaluation. The higher education institutions are encouraged to nominate subject experts primarily from departments other than their own. The recruitment of students to the panels of assessors is based on proposals from student organizations that have been granted the status of student unions. Representatives of the social partners are recruited on the basis of proposals from the relevant sectorial organizations (for instance trade or professional unions, employers' associations and other stakeholders), public authorities, companies or practitioners in the sector concerned.

For information about conflict of interest see section 3.8.

The requirements that apply to the appointment of panels for the appraisal of applications for *entitlement to award qualifications* are the same as those for the panels for quality evaluations. The composition of these panels depends on the qualification to be awarded. Subject experts are, however, always included.

Briefing experts

The Agency has produced a special manual for assessors that is intended to provide the experts with overall information about the *quality evaluation model* as well as important information about the different roles in the evaluation played by the assessors and by the Agency's project managers. The manual also contains a section on the Swedish system of higher education intended primarily for assessors from abroad. Corresponding manuals have been produced for appraisals of applications for *entitlement to award qualifications*. One important element consists of the introductory meeting arranged for the panels. The Project Managers' Manual contains a special section on the introductory meetings and the different items that should be raised.

Adequate evidence

The Agency has a long tradition of working with appraisals of applications for *entitlement to award qualifications* based on the model of application, site visit and published report. When necessary, panels of assessors have also requested supplementary material to provide a firmer basis for a decision.

As regards the *current quality evaluation* model, we have not yet been able to complete a full evaluation, and therefore cannot say with any certainty how well the material functions.

Evaluation model

The design of the Agency's *quality evaluations* includes the assessment of attainment of qualitative targets using independent projects, self-evaluation, alumni surveys and student interviews, site visits, the panel's report and the Agency's decision. The site visits are intended to enable the panels of assessors to pose questions about target attainment that have arisen in connection with its appraisal of the different material. The extent of the site visits may vary depending on how clearly the attainment of targets is shown by the various stages of the evaluation. In cases where appraisal of the other four kinds of material clearly demonstrates attainment of all the targets, the planned site visit will be cancelled.

As site visits are both time-consuming and costly, various models have been tested. In addition to the traditional form in which the panel of assessors visits the higher education institutions offering the programme, trials have been held using web-meetings and regional meetings. These tests of alternative site visit methods have been successful, which means that from 2012 the Agency will, as a rule, conduct site visits via ICT.

As the current evaluation round is a short one, in practice only three and a half years, no follow up is included of any of the programmes. On the other hand, programmes that fail to meet quality requirements, i.e. those whose entitlement to award qualifications is only extended conditionally, will be reviewed within one year (See also Section 2.6).

As already stated, appraisals of applications *for entitlement to award qualifications* involve an application, a site visit and a public report. As in the quality evaluations, here the site visits are intended to enable questions to be asked in relation to the material submitted. Appraisals of entitlement to award qualifications have a different focus from the quality evaluations, which means that issues relating to the programme pre-requisites and processes are also included.

Institutional improvement

The *quality evaluations* conclude with an opinion on the targets selected. This provides the higher education institutions with information about any targets that may not be attained and this information can be used to adopt measures to improve the programme.

After their appraisals of applications *for entitlement to award qualifications*, panels provide an opinion in which an assessment is made for each quality aspect. These assessments can give the higher education institution guidance for its continued quality assurance process.

Policies

For a list of policies, see the list of annexes and references.

ESG 2.5 Reporting

STANDARD:

Reports should be published and should be written in a style which is clear and readily accessible to its intended readership.

Any decisions, commendations or recommendations contained in reports should be easy for a reader to find.

GUIDELINES:

In order to ensure maximum benefit from external quality assurance processes, it is important that reports should meet the identified needs of the intended readership. Reports are sometimes intended for different readership groups and this will require careful attention to structure, content, style and tone.

In general, reports should be structured to cover description, analysis (including relevant evidence), conclusions, commendations, and recommendations.

There should be sufficient preliminary explanation to enable a lay reader to understand the purposes of the review, its form, and the criteria used in making decisions. Key findings, conclusions and recommendations should be easily locatable by readers.

Reports should be published in a readily accessible form and there should be opportunities for readers and users of the reports (both within the relevant institution and outside it) to comment on their usefulness.

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COMPLIANCE:

Both the Agency's decisions and the opinions of the panels of assessors are published on the Agency's external website. They are also official documents and therefore open to the public. The decisions and opinions are sent directly to the Government and the higher education institutions concerned. Decisions in *the new quality evaluation system* are structured clearly with a focus on target attainment. The opinions of the panels of assessors are attached as annexes to these decisions and they are also structured similarly, so that it is easy to make out what the Agency's decision is based on. The opinions and the accompanying documents indicate clearly how the panel of assessors has come to its decisions and what its assessments are based on. The new quality evaluation system, unlike the previous one, allows no scope for recommendations by the panels. This should be viewed in the light of the recent reform in Sweden that allows the higher education institutions greater autonomy so that they are themselves responsible for how they attain targets. On the other hand feed back will be provided for programmes with regard to the shortcomings in their attainment of targets observed by the panels during their evaluations.

Reasons are always given for the decisions made in appraisals of applications for *entitlement to award qualifications*. The opinions submitted by the assessors to the Agency include a special section that describes the circumstances of the planned programme and the panel's assessment of the programme.

ESG 2.6 Follow-up procedures

STANDARD:

Quality assurance processes which contain recommendations for action or which require a subsequent action plan, should have a predetermined follow-up procedure which is implemented consistently.

GUIDELINES:

Quality assurance is not principally about individual external scrutiny events: It should be about continuously trying to do a better job. External quality assurance does not end with the publication of the report and should include a structured follow-up procedure to ensure that recommendations are dealt with appropriately and any required action plans drawn up and implemented. This may involve further meetings with institutional or programme representatives. The objective is to ensure that areas identified for improvement are dealt with speedily and that further enhancement is encouraged.

COMPLIANCE:

The quality evaluation system focuses on educational outcomes. Given the way the system has been structured, the assessors are not expected to propose any measures directly. The opinions make it clear to what extent targets are attained. If a programme is given the overall assessment of “Inadequate quality”, this will lead to a conditional extension of the entitlement to award a qualification. Within a year the programme must submit a description of the measures adopted as a result of this conditional extension. A panel of assessors reviews this report and assesses whether the nature of these measures makes it possible to recommend that the quality of the programme need no longer be questioned. If the panel of assessors reaches the conclusion that the measures are inadequate, the Agency can decide that the higher education institution is no longer entitled to award the qualification affected by these shortcomings. Revoking entitlement to award a qualification is, however, a powerful sanction that should be used restrictively and in combination with adequate information in order to ensure predictability and transparency. For this reason the opinion will be sent to the higher education institution concerned for its response in cases where the panel of assessors has concluded that the measures are inadequate and that entitlement to award a qualification should be revoked. The panel of assessors will subsequently be able to review the institution’s response and submit its own rejoinder to the Agency before a decision is made. This kind of procedure offers the higher education institution greater legal protection and more reliable grounds on which the Agency can base its decision to exercise its powers.

No other forms of follow-up will take place because the length of the cycles has been reduced from six to four years. In this way the renewed evaluation in the following cycle will function as follow-up.

Follow-up of programmes granted *entitlement to award qualifications* takes place as and when they become subject to evaluation within the framework of the quality evaluation system.

ESG 2.7 Periodic reviews

STANDARD:

External quality assurance of institutions and/or programmes should be undertaken on a cyclical basis. The length of the cycle and the review procedures to be used should be clearly defined and published in advance.

GUIDELINES:

Quality assurance is not a static but a dynamic process. It should be continuous and not “once in a lifetime”. It does not end with the first review or with the completion of the formal follow-up procedure. It has to be periodically renewed. Subsequent external reviews should take into account progress that has been made since the previous event. The process to be used in all external reviews should be clearly

defined by the external quality assurance agency and its demands on institutions should not be greater than are necessary for the achievement of its objectives.

COMPLIANCE:

The task given to the Agency by the Government states clearly that evaluations are to be undertaken in four-year cycles. During this period all programmes leading to the award of Bachelor's, 60-credit and 120 credit Master's degrees and professional qualifications (a total of about 1,600 programmes) are to be evaluated. For budgetary reasons the Government wants reports on the findings of the evaluations that have been completed on 15 June 2012. All evaluations in the first cycle must be concluded so that they can be reported to the Government before 15 June 2014. The reason for requiring these reports is that the Government intends to allocate funding on the basis of the results of the evaluations. A timetable which shows when during this period the different main areas of study are to be evaluated has been published on the website www.hsv.se. In this way the higher education institutions have ample notice of when their programmes will be evaluated.

A new evaluation cycle will begin in 2015 following more or less the same plan as the current one.

ESG 2.8 System-wide analyses

STANDARD:

Quality assurance agencies should produce from time to time summary reports describing and analysing the general findings of their reviews, evaluations, assessments, etc.

GUIDELINES:

All external quality assurance agencies collect a wealth of information about individual programmes and/or institutions and this provides material for structured analyses across whole higher education systems. Such analyses can provide very useful information about developments, trends, emerging good practice and areas of persistent difficulty or weakness and can become useful tools for policy development and quality enhancement. Agencies should consider including a research and development function within their activities, to help them extract maximum benefit from their work.

COMPLIANCE:

The Agency organizes evaluations of first and second-cycle programmes in a way that enables a national image of student target attainment in a field (subject) to be created. The results of the evaluations can be used by the higher education institutions themselves and other stakeholders to provide national portrayals of individual subjects.

The Agency's annual accounts and reports present summaries of the evaluations undertaken during the preceding year and its observations.

Evaluation of the methodology will take place towards the end of this cycle. Here the scientific council will be able to contribute its expertise.

Compliance with the ESG for external quality assurance agencies

ESG 3.1 Use of external quality assurance procedures for higher education

STANDARD:

The external quality assurance of agencies should take into account the presence and effectiveness of the external quality assurance processes described in Part 2 of the European Standards and Guidelines.

GUIDELINES:

The standards for external quality assurance contained in Part 2 provide a valuable basis for the external quality assessment process. The standards reflect best practices and experiences gained through the development of external quality assurance in Europe since the early 1990s. It is therefore important that these standards are integrated into the processes applied by external quality assurance agencies towards the higher education institutions. The standards for external quality assurance should together with the standards for external quality assurance agencies constitute the basis for professional and credible external quality assurance of higher education institutions.

COMPLIANCE:

This is described under 2.1–2.8.

ESG 3.2 Official status

STANDARD:

Agencies should be formally recognized by competent public authorities in the European Higher Education Area as agencies with responsibilities for external quality assurance and should have an established legal basis. They should comply with any requirements of the legislative jurisdictions within which they operate.

COMPLIANCE:

The Agency was established in 1995. As a state agency its role is safeguarded in the constitution. It operates under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Research, receiving its funding through appropriation from the state budget and is responsible for a number of matters with regard to higher education, among them quality assurance of higher education institutions. It should be added that as a consequence of the restructuring of certain government agencies in the area of higher education, the function of quality assurance will be entrusted to a new agency as from 2013. This will not, however, alter the status of quality assurance as a responsibility carried out by a state agency nor the activities planned for the coming years.

ESG 3.3 Activities

STANDARD:

Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities (at institutional or programme level) on a regular basis.

GUIDELINES:

These may involve evaluation, review, audit, assessment, accreditation or other similar activities and should be part of the core functions of the agency.

COMPLIANCE:

The Agency's evaluations are undertaken regularly and these activities have been planned and implemented continually since 1995. As the historical review indicates, the methodology has varied. At the moment the focus is on the evaluation of qualifications with explicit emphasis on the outcomes of the programmes evaluated. These evaluations are to be undertaken over a four-year period (2011–2014) and the plan for this work is published on the Agency's website. This shows which programmes are to be evaluated and when. The Department of Quality Assurance also undertakes continuous appraisals of applications from HEIs for entitlement to award new qualifications.

Work is under way on the methodology for the evaluation of qualifications in the fine, applied and performing arts. In the future the Agency must also develop methods for the appraisal of third-cycle programmes and undertake such evaluations.

The Government has also given the Agency the task of evaluating programmes that do not lead to the award of a qualification. A selection of programmes has been made and the first evaluations will take place during the autumn of 2011. This task is to be reported to the Government in the Agency's annual report.

Quality assurance is one of the Agency's core functions. Other important areas for which the Agency is responsible are statistics and analysis in the higher education sphere, recognizing qualifications from abroad, and monitoring and reviewing how higher education institutions apply laws and ordinances. These activities inform and support each other.

ESG 3.4 Resources

STANDARD:

Agencies should have adequate and proportional resources, both human and financial, to enable them to organize and run their external quality assurance process(es) in an effective and efficient manner, with appropriate provision for the development of their processes and procedures and staff.

COMPLIANCE:

Our assessment is that the financial resources available to us today are sufficient for the tasks to be undertaken. As during this cycle we must conduct the evaluations in three and a half years instead of six as previously and at the same time we have altered our routines, the Department of Quality Assurance has recruited a larger staff. As indicated above, an inquiry is under way into replacing the current three agencies in the higher education sphere with two. Even if our task of evaluating programmes will not be affected appreciably this may affect the way in which the Department of Quality Assurance and our operations are organized.

The Department of Quality Assurance has a staff of 32, all of whom are highly qualified. We have a good mixture of women and men of different ages. Many members of our staff have experience from working in other agencies, the government offices, research councils and the higher education institutions.

The Agency endeavours to be an attractive employer. When posts are advertised the Agency often receives a large number of qualified applicants and members of our staff are often loaned to ministries and public enquiries in our field of expertise. Professional development is regularly arranged for the staff of the Department of Quality Assurance. Evaluation methodology, language courses, project management training are examples of topics covered in recent years. Participation in national and international conferences and meetings is encouraged to extend the department's network and contacts.

The Agency is allocated an appropriation by the Government each year. There is a regular dialogue on the budget with the Ministry of Education and Research. The Agency's operations are audited regularly to ensure that resources are used efficiently and responsibly. Every year the Agency compiles a report in which the outcomes of the operational year are accounted for. This annual report is submitted to the Government. The most recent annual report is attached as Annex 14.

ESG 3.5 Mission statement

STANDARD:

Agencies should have clear and explicit goals and objectives for their work, contained in a publicly available statement.

GUIDELINES:

These statements should describe the goals and objectives of agencies' quality assurance processes, the division of labour with relevant stakeholders in higher education, especially the higher education institutions, and the cultural and historical context of their work. The statements should make clear that the external quality assurance process is a major activity of the agency and that there exists a systematic approach to achieving its goals and objectives. There should also be documentation to demonstrate how the statements are translated into a clear policy and management plan.

COMPLIANCE:

Matters of policy that affect the Agency's evaluation procedures are mainly governed by the instructions (Annex 15) issued by the Government and the public service agreement (Annex 16) received by the Agency specifying its tasks etc. According to our instructions, the Agency is, among other things, to assume responsibility for the quality assurance of higher education by evaluating first, second and third-cycle programmes and by appraising applications for entitlement to award qualifications.

The instructions have been broken down into objectives in the regulatory document that exists for quality assurance and appraisal of application for entitlement to award qualifications (See annexes). These documents show, for instance, that we use a peer-review model and that there is a division of responsibilities between the Agency, the Ministry and the sector.

The Agency's policy offers an overarching presentation of how it should function. This policy also describes who it is for, what it has to achieve and how to set about it. The policy was adopted by the University Chancellor in 2011 (Annex 17).

This policy lays down that "The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education shall enhance Sweden as a knowledge nation by assuring the quality of and developing higher education. The Agency shall be the country's leading authority where higher education is concerned, nationally and internationally. The expertise accumulated by the Agency must be disseminated actively".

Every year an appraisal is made of how well we attain our goals and discharge our duties (cf. under 3, section 3.4). We consider that we have a clear view of the objectives of our evaluation procedures and that we communicate this clearly to the world around us.

ESG 3.6 Independence

STANDARD:

Agencies should be independent to the extent both that they have autonomous responsibility for their operations and that the conclusions and recommendations made in their reports cannot be influenced by third parties such as higher education institutions, ministries or other stakeholders.

GUIDELINES:

An agency will need to demonstrate its independence through measures, such as:

- *its operational independence from higher education institutions and governments;*
- *is guaranteed in official documentation (e.g. instruments of governance or legislative acts);*
- *the definition and operation of its procedures and methods, the nomination and appointment of external experts and the determination of the outcomes of its quality assurance processes are undertaken autonomously and independently from governments, higher education institutions, and organs of political influence;*
- *while relevant stakeholders in higher education, particularly students/learners, are consulted in the course of quality assurance processes, the final outcomes of the quality assurance processes remain the responsibility of the agency.*

COMPLIANCE:

The Instrument of Government (Chapter 12, Article 2) contains a provision stipulating that the Government may not determine how the Agency shall adjudicate in a particular case that involves the exercise of public power against an individual or the application of a rule of law. The Government may issue general directions about the actions of the Agency and to some extent how these are to be undertaken but may not therefore affect specific decisions about entitlement to award qualifications, for instance, or evaluation results.

When assessors are being recruited, the parties concerned, i.e. higher education institutions, student organizations, sectorial organizations, etc. are requested to propose individuals who should be included in the panels. It is, however, the Agency that makes its independent decision on the final composition of the panels of assessors.

The Agency has adopted a peer-review procedure for all of its evaluation activities and appraisals of applications for entitlement to award qualifications. The Agency's decisions in quality evaluations and appraisals of applications for entitlement to award qualifications are based on the opinions of the panels of assessors. The actual decision is, however, independent of the assessors' reports. The Agency may have an opinion that differs from the assessors' and

make a decision other than that proposed by a panel, which has also occurred albeit in exceptional cases.

Our view is that there is no difference between the Agency and other public agencies in Sweden in the way in which tasks are assigned by the Government.

ESG 3.7 External quality assurance criteria and processes used by the agencies

STANDARD:

- i. The processes, criteria and procedures used by agencies should be pre-defined and publicly available.*
- ii. These processes will normally be expected to include:*
 - *a self-assessment or equivalent procedure by the subject of the quality assurance process;*
 - *an external assessment by a group of experts, including, as appropriate, (a) student member(s), and site visits as decided by the agency;*
 - *publication of a report, including any decisions, recommendations or other formal outcomes;*
 - *a follow-up procedure to review actions taken by the subject of the quality assurance process in the light of any recommendations contained in the report.*
- iii. A mandatory cyclical external review of the agency's activities at least once every five years which includes a report on its conformity with the membership criteria of ENQA.*

GUIDELINES:

Agencies may develop and use other processes and procedures for particular purposes. Agencies should pay careful attention to their declared principles at all times, and ensure both that their requirements and processes are managed professionally and that their conclusions and decisions are reached in a consistent manner, even though the decisions are formed by groups of different people. Agencies that make formal quality assurance decisions, or conclusions which have formal consequences should have an appeals procedure. The nature and form of the appeals procedure should be determined in the light of the constitution of each agency.

COMPLIANCE:

An account is given in section 2.2 of the development of quality evaluation procedures.

As a government agency, the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education is required by Swedish law to make public documents available to the public at large. This means that the Agency's decisions, reports and the opinions submitted by the panels of assessors are all examples of documents that are available on the Agency's website as are descriptions of the Agency's evaluation system and the political documents on which its development has been based.

As described in earlier sections of this self-evaluation, the evaluation model includes self-evaluation and external assessment by panels of experts that include students. Site visits are normally conducted using ICT and the panels' reports and the decisions made by the Agency are published on the Agency's website. Evaluations are followed-up as described in section 2.6.

Appealing against the Agency's decisions

The question of how appeals can be made against decisions was raised by the ENQA panel of experts during its appraisal of the Agency in 2005. As was the case then, Section 6 of Chapter 12 of the Higher Education Ordinance (1993:100) lays down that no appeal may be made against the Agency's decisions. The Agency has drawn the Government's attention to the question of appeal but has still received no answer to its request for a review of this issue. The higher education institutions do, however, have the possibility to express an opinion about decisions in cases where there is a risk that entitlement to award a qualification may be revoked according to the following procedure.

On the basis of the opinion submitted by a panel of assessors, the Agency decides whether entitlement to award a qualification is to be revoked or not. In cases where a panel recommends that entitlement should be revoked, its opinion is sent to the higher education institution concerned for its points of view. If a response is submitted, the Agency makes no decision before the institution's standpoint has been taken into account. This procedure offers greater legal protection and more reliable grounds for the decision by the Agency to exercise its powers. Even though a higher education institution has no possibility of appealing against a decision by the Agency, nevertheless this procedure enables the institution to express an opinion before the decision is made.

ESG 3.8 Accountability procedures

STANDARD:

Agencies should have in place procedures for their own accountability.

GUIDELINES:

These procedures are expected to include the following:

- i. a published policy for the assurance of the quality of the agency itself, made available on its website;*
- ii. documentation which demonstrates that:*
 - the agency's processes and results reflect its mission and goals of quality assurance;*
 - the agency has in place, and enforces, a no-conflict-of-interest mechanism in the work of its external experts, Committee/Council/Board and staff members;*

- *the agency has reliable mechanisms that ensure the quality of any activities and material produced by subcontractors, if some or all of the elements in its quality assurance procedure are subcontracted to other parties;*
- *the agency has in place internal quality assurance procedures which include an internal feedback mechanism (i.e. a means to collect feedback from its own staff and council/board); an internal reflection mechanism (i.e. means to react to internal and external recommendations for improvement); and an external feedback mechanism (i.e. means to collect feedback from experts and reviewed institutions for future development) in order to inform and underpin its own development and improvement.*

COMPLIANCE:

A joint policy for the quality assurance of the Agency's operations is under development. The department has routines for ensuring that assessments are undertaken in a comparable manner. Overall support for this work is provided by the Project Managers' Manual, which contains a description of the various elements in the evaluation system with references to a number of supporting documents. This describes, for instance:

- The division of responsibility between the project managers and the assessors
- Recruitment of assessors
- A description of the different phases in the evaluations
- Routines for quality assurance of decisions.

Further support for assuring the comparability of the evaluations is provided in the Assessors' Manual. This includes, for instance, procedural guidelines for their task.

One important element in quality assurance of the evaluations is also the implementation of a new digital tripartite case-management system: HSV Assessor View (for assessors), Project Manager View (for project managers in the Agency) and HSV Direkt (for the higher education institutions).

Internal feedback is provided by regular meetings where staff can exchange experiences and reflect on the work that is under way in which either the department as a whole or smaller project groups participate. Questions are also forwarded to the department's management team for decision or further review.

The department also gathers external experiences, for instance through working groups with participants from the sector, including students, as well as representatives of the social partners. Currently questionnaires for assessors are being developed to procure feedback that can be used to improve our operations. A more systematic follow-up of the first round of evaluations in the first cycle will also be conducted in 2012.

As already stated (see page 10) there are a reference group and a scientific council on evaluation issues that provide support for the development of the evaluation systems.

Conflict of interest

The regulations on conflict of interest have been clarified in new guidelines from the Agency (Annex 18). This issue has been given greater prominence in the quality evaluation system, for instance a completed conflict of interest form is always attached to the letters of appointment for the assessors who take part in our evaluations. The case management system that has been developed to support the evaluation process also contains built-in “safety checks”. These prevent assessors from accessing material concerning programmes where conflict of interest may apply.

Miscellaneous

- i. The agency pays careful attention to its declared principles at all times, and ensures that its requirements and processes are managed professionally and that its judgments and decisions are reached in a consistent manner, even if the judgments are formed by different groups;*
- ii. If the agency makes formal quality assurance decisions, or conclusions which have formal consequences, it should have an appeals procedure. The nature and form of the appeals procedure should be determined in the light of the constitution of the agency;*
- iii. The agency is willing to contribute actively to the aims of ENQA.*
 - Item i. is dealt with in section 2.3
 - Item ii. is dealt with in 3.7

As regards item iii., the former University Chancellor was a member of the ENQA Board for three years. Furthermore, the Agency is frequently represented in ENQA working groups and staff members regularly participate at ENQA conferences.

Reflections and learning points

We should like to focus a few important observations that we have made during the process of working on this self-evaluation.

With this latest evaluation system, the task of the Agency has changed in essence and it has become more supervisory. Almost two decades of experience of evaluation procedures in different forms has helped to establish a strong quality culture in the department. Our endeavour will be to enhance this quality culture now that we have taken on a more supervisory role.

New quality evaluation system

The explicit focus on outcomes in the new quality evaluation system involves a radical shift of methodology for us. We are not only beginning a new cycle of evaluations with a system that is, for the Agency, a new one and which includes many elements which are, for us, untried. The feeling of being pioneers exploring new areas is stimulating and challenging but at the same time we are also required to stick firmly to the model we are working with and to our own working procedures. Not the least important thing for us is to be able to explain and create legitimacy for the new system among assessors and higher education institutions.

What benefits does the new system offer?

- Quality assurance outcomes measures will focus on two areas: quality evaluation and appraisal of entitlement to award qualifications. In this way we can fine-tune our task and what we do. This will hopefully make our task clearer not only to us but to the world around us.
- Focus on achieved learning outcomes places our most important target group in the centre: students. This will give us an evaluation system that concentrates on students, what they learn and their right to high quality education.
- Increased knowledge of the national qualitative targets.
- The evaluation system is quality enhancing. The higher education institutions no longer assess the goal attainment of their students in the ways they used to. In certain cases institutions have decided to close down a programme facing evaluation.

What challenges does this present?

As in all new systems initially there are “teething troubles” that need to be remedied. We have already been able to identify a few with the help of our pilot trials and others will be discovered when we follow up the first and sec-

ond rounds of the quality evaluations during 2012. A few examples of what we have identified as challenges are:

- Evaluations are being undertaken at a faster pace. Now cycles are to last for four years instead of six as before and cover basically the same number of programmes. Are we going to be forced to rationalize some of the things we hoped to find time for out of existence?
- Changes in routines, for us, for the sector and for assessors. This is a major readjustment for all of us and it is easy to relapse into the kind of thinking that is more concerned with pre-requisites and processes than with actual outcomes. Initially, the higher education institutions have had problems in accounting for the results of their self-evaluations.
- The new system focuses on independent projects. What impact will this have on the evaluations and on programmes? Some programmes have a long tradition of producing independent projects. For others it is an innovation. In many programmes an independent project is not considered to be the “crowning glory” either, but merely part of the study process. This applies above all to many professional programmes.

The future

What long-term consequences for higher education in Sweden the new quality evaluation system will have remains to be seen. It is, however, clear that it is part of a changing higher education landscape that is likely to be characterized by more cooperation between higher education institutions, result-based funding and greater institutional autonomy. In this context the role of the Agency will be to monitor to ensure that the outcomes of programmes maintain high standards. The responsibility for development and improvements will rest with the higher education institutions.

One immediate consequence of the change in the Agency’s task is that there will be greater focus on equivalence and transparency in its evaluations and other operations. For this reason extra time and effort has been devoted to these particular aspects.

In the future the Agency will also be evaluating third-cycle programmes. The challenge consists of finding an evaluation method that is not too far from the result-oriented method used for first and second-cycle programmes while at the same time the special conditions that apply to third-cycle education are taken into account.

As has already been mentioned, the Agency’s evaluation activities will form part of a new agency structure from 1 January 2013. This change is unlikely to affect the evaluation task in itself but does bring a number of issues into focus. One future challenge will be to continue to retain and develop the peer-review model in evaluation in an agency that has a distinct supervisory function. Our awareness of the possibility of this kind of conflict is shared by those inquiring into the future of the Agency, which we feel is positive.

Some learning points

The process of completing a self-evaluation has given us a good opportunity to view what we do from an external perspective and with self-critical eyes. As we are launching a new evaluation system there are few results to present. It has, however, already been useful to see what discrepancies or shortcomings exist in relation to the European Standards and Guidelines and to ensure that they are remedied. The European Standards and Guidelines were not the primary point of departure when the new evaluation system was being developed, but we have endeavoured all the time to make sure that our operations are in line with the substance of the European Standards and Guidelines. Thanks to this self-evaluation, we have now been obliged to tackle questions that arise towards the end of the cycle or even beyond the first evaluation cycle. This has been a source of strength in our work and left us better equipped to face the challenges that lie ahead.

References

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Other documents of relevance

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The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education is an authority that deals with issues concerning Swedish universities and other institutions of higher education. The Agency's tasks involve quality reviews, the supervision, monitoring and development of higher education, producing reports and analyses, evaluation of foreign qualifications and the provision of information for students.

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