

Report 2012:6 R

Students' study patterns and total lengths of study



In English

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Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (Högskoleverket) • Luntmakargatan 13
P.O. Box 7851, SE-103 99 Stockholm • tel. +46 8 563 085 00 • fax +46 8 563 085 50
e-mail hsv@hsv.se • www.hsv.se

Students' study patterns and total lengths of study

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Contents: National Agency, Department of of Higher Education Analysis, **Lena Eriksson**

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Summary

Higher education in Sweden is distinguished by its flexibility and also offers great freedom of choice, which is used by the students. It is possible to choose from a large number of programmes and courses with a variety of specialisations and different scopes. People may study in higher education at any age and can return to higher education for new or supplementary studies.

However, this open system, that is characteristic of Swedish higher education, entails some difficulties with the statistical description of the students' periods of study. So far, such descriptions have primarily been limited to information about periods of study for programmes leading to a professional qualification, which have a start date and an end date. Statistical follow-ups based on degree statistics are made additionally difficult as students in Sweden must request their degree certificates, though many choose not to do so despite completing their studies.

This report demonstrates that a long follow-up period, one that is not limited to studying for a degree or within a programme, is necessary if one wants to investigate students' entire periods of study. For example, mapping the students' study patterns in the form of the number of study periods and total periods of study requires follow-ups throughout an "entire adult life".

This survey is based on information in the higher education register that is kept by Statistiska centralbyrån, SCB (Statistics Sweden). This register contains information about everyone who has registered for higher education and dates back to 1977. This means that the longest period for which we have been able to follow new entrants to higher education is just over 30 years.

The higher education register also contains information about the people who completed an undergraduate degree before 1977. However, undergraduate education prior to 1977 did not include healthcare training or much of the available teacher education. These became part of higher education in 1977.

The survey covers all those who were new entrants to higher education during the 1978/79–1997/98 period, as well as those who completed a higher education degree in the system used prior to 1977 and who were registered in higher education after 1977. Follow-ups were carried out up to and including 2009/10.

The survey of students' study patterns looks at the extent to which students return to higher education for new studies after finishing a period of study, how long these periods of study have been and what this has entailed for the students' total length of study measured in the number of registered semesters.

The group of individuals that we can follow longest are thus those who completed one or more degrees by the academic year of 1976/77 in the previous higher education system, and who were then registered in higher education on one or more occasions up to the academic year of 2009/10. A number of these people are now above the age of 60.

The survey's results show that lifelong learning is a reality – particularly for women. This publication in English includes summaries of the report's most important results.

Recurring periods of study

Out of all new entrants to higher education during the 20-year period of 1978/79–1997/98, over 40 per cent have had at least two periods of study. The women have returned to new periods of study to a much greater extent than the men. Half of the women and a third of the men have had at least two periods of study.

The longer time that women have had to return, the more they have done so. Men do not seem to be as dependent on time as a factor.

New entrants 1978/79–1997/98, divided into four groups of five annual intakes and the proportion of these who studied at least 1, 2, 3 or 4 periods.

WOMEN	New entrants	Proportion (%) who studied for at least			
		1 period	2 per	3 per	4 per
78/79–82/83	141 706	100	53	26	11
83/84–87/88	125 447	100	51	23	9
88/89–92/93	146 639	100	49	19	5
93/94–97/98	179 610	100	43	12	2
78/79–97/98	593402	100	49	19	6

MEN	New entrants	Proportion (%) who studied for at least			
		1 period	2 per	3 per	4 per
78/79–82/83	89 538	100	35	12	4
83/84–87/88	88 813	100	36	12	4
88/89–92/93	110 740	100	37	12	3
93/94–97/98	140 731	100	33	8	1
78/79–97/98	429 822	100	35	11	3

The tendency to return to a new period of study is highest among entrants in the health and caring sciences, which is a large, female-dominated area. However, this only partly explains the gender differences. The proportion that has more than one period of study is consistently higher among women than among men in all subject areas.

New entrants 1978/79–1997/98 per subject area and the proportion of these who returned to higher education for a new period of study.

Area, semester of new entry	WOMEN		MEN	
	New entrant 78/79–97/98	New study period %	New entrant 78/79–97/98	New study period %
Humanities and theology	106 560	54	51 978	45
Law and social science	173 068	44	140 228	32
Teacher education	116 190	46	32 647	36
Natural science	29 608	45	40 708	42
Engineering	28 791	42	127 348	31
Agriculture and forestry	2 317	47	5 762	30
Medicine and odontology	15 083	36	8 745	26
Health and caring science	109 662	60	13 241	52
Arts	7 341	45	5 936	33
Other areas ¹⁾	4 756	48	3 204	31
All	593 376	49	429 797	35

1. Courses that cannot be placed within a particular subject area, e.g. interdisciplinary courses.

The lengths of the periods of study

The feature that differentiates men's and women's study patterns is that men seem to be more likely to concentrate their studies to *one* period of study, but with many registered semesters, while the women do not study for as long in their first period of study and are more likely to return for new periods of study.

A considerably larger proportion of the men than the women were thus registered for at least ten semesters in their first period of study, which reflects the different educational choices made by men and women. In subsequent periods of study, the men were more likely than the women to study for just *one* semester.

The number of registered semesters was greatest for both women and men in the first (for some the only) period of study, compared to the following periods. The distinctive feature of the periods of study that follow the first one is that the proportion with 1–2 registered semesters increases with each new period of study, for both women and men.

The below table shows new entrants and is limited to the period 1978/79 – 1987/88, i.e. the ten first years of the twenty-year period, so that the follow-up period is as long as possible.

New entrants 1978/79–1987/88 and the number that returned for new periods of study.

	Period 1	Period 2	Period 3	Period 4	Period 5–
Women	267 139	139 898	66 029	26 453	8 608
Per cent	100	52	25	10	3
Men	178 338	63 238	21 598	7 015	1 944
Per cent	100	35	12	4	1

The proportion with different numbers of registered semesters in each period of study, per cent.

WOMEN	Period 1	Period 2	Period 3	Period 4	Period 5–
1–2 sem.	31	62	66	68	71
3–6 sem.	45	27	27	26	25
7–9 sem.	13	7	5	4	3
10– sem.	11	4	3	2	1
Total	100	100	100	100	100

MEN	Period 1	Period 2	Period 3	Period 4	Period 5–
1–2 sem.	32	62	69	72	74
3–6 sem.	27	24	23	22	21
7–9 sem.	19	8	5	4	3
10– sem.	22	6	4	3	2
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Total study lengths – the number of registered semesters

Almost a third of the women and over a third of the men have been registered for a total of at least 10 semesters (5 years). This applies on average for all new entrants throughout the entire 20-year period (1978/79–1997/98).

The proportion with at least 10 registered semesters has gradually increased and was thus greater among new entrants in the mid-1990s than among new entrants at the end of the 1970s, despite the latter group having had a longer time to return to new periods of study.

Of all the new entrants in the last five years of the 20-year period, 37 per cent of both the men and women had at least 10 registered semesters while only around 4 per cent of those awarded qualifications at the end of the 1990s and the first half of the 2000s, among both men and women, had an accumulated length of study of at least 10 semesters. This shows that the length of study in awarded qualifications is not at all a measure of the students' total study length.

New entrants 1978/79–1997/98, divided into four groups of five annual intakes and distributed according to the number of registered semesters (per cent of all new entrants in each group).

WOMEN	New entrants	New entrants distributed as % over the total number of registered semesters						
		1 sem.	2 sem.	3–9 sem.	10–20 sem.	21– sem.	All	
	1978/79–1982/83	141 706	10	9	53	25	2	100
	1983/84–1987/88	125 447	9	9	52	29	2	100
	1988/89–1992/93	146 639	8	6	51	34	1	100
	1993/94–1997/98	179 610	11	7	45	36	1	100
	1978/79–1997/98	593402	9	8	50	31	1	100

MEN	New entrants	New entrants distributed as % over the total number of registered semesters						
		1 sem.	2 sem.	3–9 sem.	10–20 sem.	21– sem.	All	
	1978/79–1982/83	89 538	12	13	44	29	2	100
	1983/84–1987/88	88 813	10	10	45	33	2	100
	1988/89–1992/93	110 740	9	7	45	38	1	100
	1993/94–1997/98	140 731	12	8	44	36	1	100
	1978/79–1997/98	429 822	11	9	44	34	1	100

Registered for one semester

There is a relatively stable proportion of each new entrant intake that has been registered no more than one semester and then not returned to higher education among new entrants throughout the entire 20-year period (1978/79–1997/98). Regardless of the size of the entire new entrant intake, the proportion of “one semester students” is strikingly constant, namely 10 per cent.

Of the one semester students, around 85 per cent were registered on free-standing courses, of which almost half were in the fields of law and social science. One semester students are considerably older than other students. There is much to indicate that they have studied one or more courses for continuing professional development or general educational purposes.

Study patterns in the fields of law and social science

The survey also includes a description of the study pattern among new entrants in some major subject areas. In this case, it applies to new entrants during the ten-year period 1978/79–1987/88 so that the follow-up period can be as long as possible.

New entrants in law and social science are the largest group among both men and women, and we have chosen to present the students' study patterns and lengths of study in this combined area.

The number of periods of study among the new entrants in the area of law and social science follow the same pattern we have seen among all new entrants. Almost half of the women and a third of the men have had at least two periods of study.

Those who returned for a second period of study often returned to the same area, i.e. law and social science. However, around a quarter of both the women and men changed focus.

A low proportion, 40 per cent of the women and 37 per cent of the men, finished a qualification in their first period of study. The area has a large range of freestanding courses that are traditionally studied for continuing professional development or general education, often with no intention of gaining a qualification. 14 per cent of new entrants in the area of law and social science were one semester students.

Women who started their studies in the area of law and social science provide a good illustration of what is usually called lifelong learning.

The table below shows that 47 per cent of the women who were new entrants in the area of law and social science studied at least two periods, 21 per cent at least three periods, 8 per cent at least four periods and 3 per cent at least five periods.

Women who were new entrants 1978/79–1987/88 in the area of law and social science. Age at the start of each new period of study. The largest age group is marked.

Age	Period 1	Period 2	Period 3	Period 4	Period 5
–25	42 869	4 665	91	0	0
26–29	6 866	6 846	1 037	28	0
30–34	7 743	6 525	2 752	461	26
35–39	7 559	5 996	3 499	1 226	242
40–44	5 496	5 372	3 457	1 609	569
45–49	3 080	3 645	2 579	1 361	525
50–	2 309	2 865	2 248	1 264	607
All	75 922	35 914	15 663	5 949	1 969
%	100	47	21	8	3

56 per cent of the women were younger than 25 when they started studying law or social science. 14 per cent were older than 40 when they started their first period of study. Accordingly, their age increases when they start their second, third, etc., period of study, and at the start of the fifth period the largest group is the over-50s.

Study patterns among graduates prior to 1977

The population that could be followed for the longest period of time consists of the people who graduated in the years 1969/70–1976/77 as part of the higher education of the time. The reason for presenting returns to higher education, as well as the total lengths of study for these people, is that the follow-up period is even longer than for new entrants after 1977. Of these people, almost half are now 65 or older. The study is limited to those who graduated before 1977 with a qualification that was then part of the higher education system.

The women have been registered after 1976/77 to a greater extent than the men, 63 per cent compared to 42 per cent. Also, the women have been registered for more periods of study than the men and also for more semesters in total.

The pattern that is described for new entrants after 1977 thus also applies to the people who graduated before 1977 in that time's higher education system, namely that the women are more likely than men to return to new periods of study in higher education.

One third of the women have returned to at least two periods of study and 9 per cent to at least four new periods of study – in addition to the studies that were carried out prior to 1977 and resulted in a qualification. This confirms what is stated in the section on new entrants after 1977, namely that lifelong learning or recurring higher education actually happens, particularly among women.

Graduates 1969/70–1976/77 and the number that returned for new periods of study.

	Graduated	New period of study after graduating			
		Period 1	Period 2	Period 3	Period 4–
Women	47 935	30 280	15 792	7 489	4 442
Per cent	100	63	33	16	9
Men	68 879	28 907	10 517	3 893	1 821
Per cent	100	42	15	6	3

The proportion with different numbers of registered semesters in each period of study, per cent.

WOMEN	Period 1	Period 2	Period 3	Period 4–
1–2 sem.	59	67	70	73
3–6 sem.	30	27	25	23
7–8 sem.	5	3	3	2
9– sem.	6	3	2	2
Totalt	100	100	100	100

MEN	Period 1	Period 2	Period 3	Period 4–
1–2 sem.	62	71	74	75
3–6 sem.	28	24	21	21
7–8 sem.	5	3	2	1
9– sem.	5	3	2	3
Totalt	100	100	100	100

The table shows that a higher education qualification, particularly for women, does not mean that higher education is over for good. Once again, this demonstrates the importance of a long follow-up period.

Concluding comments

The picture of students' study patterns that has developed during work on the report can be described in the following way:

The students' total lengths of study – over a longer period of time – is not at all that which is presented in the statistics regarding lengths of study for the qualifications awarded to the students. Especially for women, it is common to see what is usually called lifelong learning within the scope of higher education, i.e. that they return several times for new periods of study. Men also do so, but not to the same extent as the women.

The period of study that lasts longest, measured in the number of registered semesters, is the first one for both women and men – and is the only one for some of them. During this period of study, the men study more semesters than the women but, as said, the women return for new periods of study to a much greater extent, which means that their total number of registered semesters is around the same as for the men.

It is sometimes said that women study more at the level of higher education than men, because they are more likely to study in the areas for which higher education offers higher degrees and continuing professional development, particularly in the areas of health and caring sciences and teaching.

This is true, but it is far from explaining all the recurring education that women participate in. The biggest area for all new entrants – both women and men – is law and social science. Women who have been new entrants in this area return to a new period of study to a much greater extent than men who have been new entrants in the same area. This applies to all subject areas. The area in which a person studies thus only provides a limited explanation of the differences between the genders as regards the likelihood of returning to a new period of study.

There does not seem to be any time or age limit for returning to higher education. This can be seen, for example, among the people who graduated before 1977, as there were around 1,100 who returned for a second period of study in 2005/06–2009/10, i.e. 30 years or more after the first period of study. More than half of them were then over 60.

As well as the women and men with long total lengths of study, often divided into several periods of study, there is another group that has a constant presence in higher education, namely those we have called one semester students. In other reports, Högskoleverket (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education) has stated that students' motivations for studying can vary and that not all students study with the intention of obtaining a qualification. There is a group that studies for continuing professional development or for general educational purposes and who apply to higher education to study one or more individual courses.

This survey establishes that from 1977, and 20 years forward, there has been an almost constant proportion of students in each new intake, namely 10 per cent, who have been registered for no more than one semester and who have then never returned to higher education. Naturally, we do not know the motivation for their studies, but because 86 per cent chose to register on a freestanding course and were also older than the others we can, with good reason, assume that these studies are for continuing professional development or general education. At the same time, we can also see that there is another category among the one semester students, namely those who started a programme that leads to a professional qualification and then left it and higher education “for ever”, during or after the first semester.

When working on this report it has become apparent that the statistics regarding the scope of studies that have so far been described in different contexts have provided a very limited image of the students’ total lengths of study.

If one wants to investigate the students’ total lengths of study in a system like that in Sweden, with freedom of choice and flexibility, the number of how many semesters the students have been registered in higher education must be investigated over a very long period of time. The same applies if one wants to investigate the extent to which students return to higher education – i.e. how common lifelong learning is. In this report we have been able to establish that lifelong learning is a reality – particularly for women.

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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