

Report 2009:34 R

Centres of Excellence in Higher Education 2009

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Centres of Excellence in Higher Education 2009

Published by the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education 2009

Högskoleverkets rapportserie 2009:34 R

ISSN 1653-0632

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Cover photo: Alexander Florencio

Graphic design: Department of Communications

Printed by: Rydheims Tryckeri AB, Jönköping, December 2009

Printed on environmentally labelled paper

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Summary

In November 2008, Höskoleverket (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education) invited higher-education institutions to apply for recognition as Centres of Excellence in Higher Education, this being the third time that they had undertaken such an exercise. The purpose of the initiative is to provide incentives for educational units that already maintain a high standard of quality to seek further improvement and inspire others.

Four applications were submitted by two institutions. The assessment process was similar to that of previous years. Three applications were selected by the International Review Panel for a second review, including a site visit. One application was recommended to the National Agency for Higher Education.

In keeping with the Panel's proposal, the Agency has decided to reward the School of Computer Science and Communication at the Royal Institute of Technology (KTH) by recognising it as a Centre of Excellence in Higher Education 2009. The School has demonstrated clearly and convincingly that it has achieved excellence and is able to sustain it.

Guidelines for assessment rest on the multiple dimensions associated with, and indicating quality. While the number of applications did not increase on this occasion, there is evidence that quality aspects are being used in Swedish higher-education institutions to drive discussions on both excellence and quality enhancement. In the first year (2007), the Panel identified some common operational features shared to varying degrees by the units proposed for recognition. The notion of excellence is discussed further in the Panel's report.

While 2009 will be the final year of the award, the proposed model for programme evaluation will serve as the basis for graduated assessment. The proposed three-grade scale includes the category of "excellent quality".

The National Agency's Comments

Sweden is not alone in recognising excellence. For instance, the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC) has recently revised the process by which Centres of Excellence in Finnish University Education are evaluated. In February 2009 the Agency's project management team was invited to make a presentation to a seminar jointly arranged by FINHEEC and the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). The Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) has drawn up a new accreditation framework around a four-grade scale that rates programmes from 'unsatisfactory' to 'excellent' (so-called 'nuanced assessment'). Furthermore, the Norwegian Association of Higher Education Institutions was commissioned by the Ministry of Education and Research to draft an extensive proposal to establish Centre for fremragende utdanning (Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning) in Norway.

While the number of applications did not increase compared to the previous round, there is clear evidence that quality aspects are being used in Swedish higher-education institutions to stimulate discussions on excellence and quality enhancement. Thus, in May 2009 both the award and the quality aspects were examined closely at a conference on quality in higher education, arranged by the Agency.

As discussed in the report from the previous round, a quality-based resource system is to be launched in Sweden. In conjunction with this, the Agency is proposing a new national system for quality assurance. The previous process involved five components, of which the award was one. The new system is proposed to have two: **accreditation (entitlement to award degrees)** and **programme evaluation (evaluation of degrees)**. Though 2009 will be the final year of the award, the new model of programme evaluation may provide the basis for a system of graduated assessment, in which the proposed three-grade scale includes the category of "excellent quality".

Finally, the Agency would like to express its sincere appreciation to all the assessors involved in the process. Through their time and effort they have contributed to fulfilling the aims that the award set out to achieve: to create incentives for educational units that already demonstrate a high standard of quality to drive further and, in doing so, to inspire others.

**THE INTERNATIONAL REVIEW
PANEL'S REPORT**

Reflections

In 2009, four units submitted applications to Högskoleverket (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education) with a view to being recognised as Centres of Excellence in Higher Education. The International Review Panel was entrusted with the task of assessing these applications. The following experts were appointed by the National Agency for Higher Education:

- Marianne Stenius (Chair of the Panel), Professor and Rector of Hanken School of Economics, Finland
- Bartek Banaszak, University of Warsaw, President of the Student's Parliament of the Republic of Poland
- Barbara Kehm, Professor of Higher Education Research at Kassel University and Managing Director of the International Centre for Higher Education Research
- Guy Neave, Professor Emeritus, CHEPS, University of Twente and Scientific Director at the Centro de Investigação de Políticas do Ensino Superior, Portugal.

The Panel would like to recommend to the University Chancellor that the following unit be honoured as a Centre of Excellence in Higher Education 2009:

- The School of Computer Sciences and Communication at the Royal Institute of Technology (KTH).

Statements and considered opinions on the applications are presented in the following pages. Firstly, the Panel will comment briefly on the review process and on the notion of 'excellence'.

It is very important to the Panel that it stands by the same level of evidence of excellence that it used in the two previous rounds. Therefore, the process of assessment used in 2009 was similar to that used previously. All applications, as well as the statements from field experts, were presented to the Panel. In general, all applications were well written, focused and well structured. Nevertheless, some room for improvement remains, especially with regard to the critical self-reflection undertaken by the applicants. In the main, the role of the site visit is to confirm the evidence of quality presented in the written application rather than to explore its omissions. The Panel found that the applications submitted this year served as good examples of how higher-education institutions or units should present themselves in an international environment. In the future, this aspect will assume even greater importance for higher-education institutions. International recruitment of the best students and the best faculty will demand that institutions base their excellence on external assessments of the learning environment as well as the unit's academic or artistic grounding.

During the review process, the Panel held meetings to discuss the applications and in particular how quality aspects submitted for appraisal should be operationalised. As in previous years, excellence takes different forms. Some units lean towards the traditional; others embrace the innovative. The evidence presented by the institutions suggested that a level of excellence – traditional or innovative – had been achieved and, moreover, could be sustained. In 2007, the Panel identified certain common operational features shared by those proposed for recognition. We firmly believe that these factors have remained valid for the units proposed for recognition throughout all three rounds and that, to varying degrees, these units both share and display the following characteristics:

- They are true learning communities: students, faculty and management share a common culture for learning.
- Their approach to quality assurance and quality enhancement is systematic.
- Mechanisms for identifying and diagnosing problems are well established. Examples, both tangible and real, show how such mechanisms and procedures lead to continuous improvement.
- At all levels, the student voice is taken into account.
- Between quality assurance operating on a university-wide level and its counterpart within the teaching unit, there is focus, clear alignment and concordance in evidence.
- The factors behind their success have been defined and analysed.
- The particular units stand and serve as development templates for other departments or institutions, in Sweden or elsewhere.
- Clear vision and strategy to advance internal and external change are manifestly present.
- The presentations made by students, teachers, administration and management are consistent and concordant.
- Teachers work in teams. Induction schemes, which train new colleagues on the ethos of the unit, its basic pedagogic techniques and their rationale, are established and active.
- Excellence in teaching is recognised by leadership.
- The interplay between teaching and research generates new impulses in both directions.

With a new quality assurance system about to be launched in Sweden, this round of reviewing Centres of Excellence in Higher Education was the last – at least for the foreseeable future. Based on the experience of these three years, some general recommendations and reflections may be put forward. There appear to be arguments in favour of restricting the type of unit that may submit an application. If the unit is too small, issues related to the sustainability of achieved excellence become crucial in the assessment. On the other hand, if it is very large excellence is difficult to achieve and demonstrate across the

whole unit. Such applications are more difficult to evaluate. Evidence provided by students in large groupings is also difficult to assess. We believe that study programmes or specific programmes and departments are the most appropriate units to assess. In our experience this does not exclude less traditional units, nor is it too normative

The issue of whether financial resources should be linked to the nomination of Centres of Excellence remains. International experience provides no clear-cut evidence. The Panel cannot exclude the possibility that the low number of applicants in the second and third rounds stems from a lack of financial incentives. Finally, the Panel recommends that the practices involved in internationalisation and benchmarking of the activities of the unit play a more distinctive role in quality aspects. In the future, excellence achieved by a unit will increasingly be documented indirectly through the internationalisation of the whole learning environment as well as through the dissemination of high-standard pedagogical approaches to a broader international environment.

The unit recommended for recognition in this report provided firm evidence of excellence. The method of selection used poses important challenges to both the process and its outcome. The fact that no one is compelled to apply is key to the process. The Panel supports such an approach. However, the Panel is well aware that other programmes, departments or units, which may rightfully claim a similar level of excellence, have for various reasons chosen not to take part. Nevertheless, it is the firm belief of the Panel that for those that have participated in 2007, 2008 and 2009, the process serves as a vehicle to improve quality over the long term. Our statements on all of the applications are presented in the following pages. They summarise the main points rather than offering detailed explanations of why a particular applicant should – or should not – be recognised as a Centre of Excellence in Higher Education in 2009.

Over the last three years, the Panel has had the privilege of closely observing the units that have participated in the assessment process and of taking part in the debate related to quality improvement in higher-education institutions in Sweden. We are convinced that the initiative has contributed to the improvement of excellence in higher education. Furthermore, we are assured that a strong commitment to teaching and learning is found within many Swedish higher-education institutions.

On behalf of the International Review Panel,

Marianne Stenius
Chair of the Panel

Institutions Reviewed

KTH, Royal Institute of Technology, School of Architecture

The KTH School of Architecture dates back to 1877 and is thus the oldest of its kind in Sweden. A recent restructuring of the governance regime of the university as a whole has led to strengthened governance at the level of the School to ensure financial stability and quality. Today, the School of Architecture is a department within the School of Architecture and the Built Environment.

The total number of students in 2008 was 294 at Bachelor's level and 176 at Master's level. Annual performance equivalents for the same year were 236 and 127, respectively.

After many difficulties, a competent and differentiated management structure seems to be in place alongside what appears to be clear distribution of responsibilities. The application states that a restructuring process embraced the curriculum and involved recruiting many new teachers over the past two years. The School ensures that all of its teachers take part in the pedagogical development programme, and the discussion of up-to-date content issues is also encouraged. However, current uptake suggests that this initiative still has some way to go. Teaching skills are rewarded when salaries are set and appear to constitute an important criterion in determining promotion.

The School's international outreach allows teachers to take part in various exchange programmes. On the one hand they have strengthened their artistic perspectives; on the other they are keen to develop research further. This is particularly visible in the four-member teams – comprising two architects, one engineer and one artist – that are attached to each 'studio' at Master's level. The programmes draw on extensive knowledge of and reflection on architecture teaching. Identifying areas with research potential is a priority, and possibilities for research collaboration with other departments explored. Moving to the main campus of KTH will encourage both research and pedagogical collaboration between the School of Architecture and other departments. With internal reform in place, the School will now have to face up to the equally delicate issue of interdepartmental linkage, which can no longer be limited by physical distance.

The School of Architecture benchmarks itself against the best schools in Europe; it will shortly be regarded as exemplary in its use of that practice.

The curriculum has been redesigned according to the Bologna criteria and great care taken to define learning outcomes, to adjust teaching techniques and to develop new examination methods. The School of Architecture served as a basic template in the extension of the Bologna structure to other parts of the University. The range of teaching methods is wide and clearly defined in its

application, as are examples of innovative assessment methods. Examinations seem closely aligned to the conditions that students will face in professional practice, including portfolio work and oral presentations. Teaching methods seem innovative but examinations should be more transparent. Degree projects are assessed by a panel, with membership drawn from all four Nordic countries.

At the first level, there are many part-time teachers. Communication must be tightened up to ensure that first-level teaching corresponds to the plan set by the responsible teachers and that results are passed on quickly to students.

A number of elements of quality assurance are already established. Students have influence on possible changes in the programme and its organisation. However, a sustainable quality assurance system is not yet implemented.

The climate is encouraging and teachers seem both dedicated and enthusiastic in terms of guiding their students. Every attempt is made to produce excellent graduates and the approach is very individual. Student support services have been improved recently, as has the recruitment of new students. Improvements to the work environment occur constantly, but further development is needed. Students have round-the-clock access to workshops, which is reflected in their enthusiastic and often highly individual work styles.

The programme is highly selective, admitting only one student out of every six applicants. Not surprisingly, completion rates are high. The number of female graduates has increased in recent years, and both teachers and management agree that the further diversification of the student body ranks among the School's main challenges in the future.

The labour market is highly appreciative of the knowledge and skills displayed by the School's graduates. Contacts with both business- and public-sector employers are close and ongoing. External members figure on the School's academic council. However, systematic and regular follow-up surveys of graduates remain to be developed. And while evening courses, which allow former students to return for further training, are seen as an important contact point, alumni networks could be structured better and could make this function more systematic.

Factors leading to success are defined. With a good infrastructure, modern curriculum and sound quality management, particular emphasis is placed on the studio approach to develop specialisation, together with the new impetus provided by new teaching-staff appointments and the consolidation of team teaching. The initiatives to both develop curriculum renewal further and recruit world-class lecturers in the artistic, scholarly and educational domains, as well as the School's commitment to a high international profile, underpin this strategy and consolidate it. The result is a complex and well-functioning body that seeks to tie research to practice and the School to the private sector; meanwhile, a contact network connects past and present generations of students.

Although the School of Architecture has been subject to tensions in recent years, these have given way to marked changes in structure, both within the School itself and within the institution to which it belongs. The site visit confirmed the very positive atmosphere in the School. Staff and students feel involved and now have the opportunity to shape the future development of the School of Architecture. A substantial number of new teachers have been recruited.

The new management team is confident. And while further strategic change is clearly in the offing, coordination and governance are new. Many initiatives have been launched, but these are recent. It is by no means evident that any tangible outcomes have emerged as yet. The Panel does not doubt that with the present momentum, the School has both the will and the capacity to bring its plans to full fruition.

Excellence is evident in many areas, but the School has yet to demonstrate grounded achievement just as it has still to demonstrate that such achievement can be sustained in the future. The KTH School of Architecture is thus not put forward as a Centre of Excellence in Higher Education 2009.

KTH, Royal Institute of Technology, School of Computer Science and Communication

The School of Computer Science and Communication is a self-contained unit within the KTH school system. It has a clear organisational structure and a clear distribution of responsibilities. Organisationally, the School is centralised whereas the university is largely decentralised. The present structure has been in place for four years. The School builds on cooperation between KTH and Stockholm University, which was initiated in the 1960s; several of the Master of Science programmes have a very long history.

The School's systems of quality management and assurance are highly sophisticated, elaborate and ongoing; they serve as an example for others within the University as well as for other institutions. Students are represented on all important decision-making bodies but there are also other, remarkably varied methods of gathering student opinion.

The curriculum and every individual course are reviewed and improved on an annual basis, as is the examination system, the infrastructure (rooms, computers, etc.) and the teaching–learning nexus. The procedures are clear and quality grounded firmly in a coherent evaluation and quality cycle linked to that of the institution as a whole.

In 2008, the total number of full-time students in the five programmes offered by the School was 580 at Bachelor's level and 388 at Master's level. Annual performance equivalents were 401 and 326, respectively. The School is also a major provider of courses to other parts of the University.

There is an excellent management structure, starting at the top with the Dean of the School, a member of staff responsible for undergraduate education, a chief director of studies and subject-based directors of studies. Each programme has a director and each course a leader. Leadership is characterised by continuity and stability. Teaching excellence is recognised by leadership. Many staff members have been awarded prizes for teaching and many have participated in international teacher exchange programmes. Most of the faculty have research training, although their involvement in international research projects seems modest.

The academic foundation and the appetite for best practice are very good. Previous evaluations rated the School's research as 'high international standard' to 'world-leading'. The quest to expand the frontiers of best practice is enhanced further by the incentive schemes for excellence and achievement within the School, and there is a scheme for competitive recruitment. The School strives for balance between research and teaching. Highly detailed planning of courses a year in advance is an innovative way of dealing with potential financial issues. This initiative, although complicated, is appreciated at all levels, making it possible to plan research and other forms of individual development more coherently.

A sizable amount of the teaching is project-based. Students can be involved in research, including at Master's level. Research-led approaches are introdu-

ced in advanced courses. Furthermore, there is close cooperation with industry.

Student-driven initiatives are many, for example an alumni database. Alumni surveys are carried out at university level. It is interesting to note that social media (e.g. Facebook) have become an increasingly important platform for alumni participating in and sponsoring different events.

The fact that all courses have measurable goals shows a clear commitment to ensuring that learning objectives and outcomes are kept in mind constantly. Teachers are trained in how to define learning outcomes. At the beginning of each course, students are informed about goals and examination methods, and about improvements made on the basis of the analysis of previous evaluations. The School has a long tradition of experimenting with alternative, formative types of student assessment and continuous evaluation. Convincing arguments showing that a move away from written examination could be beneficial in many ways were presented.

Continuous assessment and writing weekly reports help students adjust their workload throughout the course, and serve as 'smoke detectors', i.e. giving early warning when studies are not going well. All mandatory courses are discussed at 'link meetings', where programme management, student representatives and others discuss issues of coordination. Clearly, much time and effort are put into fostering student learning in a variety of ways, which extends to improving the infrastructure. There is an open-door policy and students have access to the computer rooms 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The School has also set itself the goal of creating a 'welcoming atmosphere' for students. The variety of methods used to gather and register student opinions on quality is impressive. However, students could be challenged further. Within the School, there are proposals for extra tasks and projects and greater student involvement in research projects. A large percentage of students go abroad as part of their study.

Student performance seems very good: one indication is the ease with which jobs are offered them, often during the course of their undergraduate studies. All Masters graduates are employed one year after graduating. Indeed, 75 per cent of those graduating were working full- or part-time even before they completed their studies. The School has recognised the problem and is trying to remedy it: for example, two teachers are specifically appointed to contact and help students who are already employed. Alumni events also serve to offer support to former students who have not yet completed their studies, usually undertaking thesis work.

Students from the Computer Science and Engineering programme perform well in international programming contests, which is effectively a form of international benchmarking. However, KTH is one of a few universities that offer specific courses targeting these competitions.

The list of success factors that the School presents is more than convincing. It is so by virtue of the procedures for evaluating course perception by students,

the incentives offered for staff excellence in teaching and other areas of achievement. The School is well aware of the elements of educational success, and is continually on the lookout for other means of assessment to sustain them. The comprehensive system for quality assurance and course development has evolved over several years, and how this system makes for improved learning is set out lucidly. This system clearly maps onto its counterpart at the university level. Experiences are shared actively with other teaching institutions, both nationally and internationally. Its Code of Honour, which aims to foster an atmosphere where both students and teachers contribute to a positive academic outlook, has inspired other universities. The idea of an 'advanced individual course' has spread abroad, and teacher exchanges are common.

There is a well-developed system for continuous improvement, well-defined development plans in the medium term and a clear vision for the future. In the School, a wide strategic vision at management level acts in complement with the pragmatism of the academic staff. The application from the School of Computer Science and Communication, including site visit, has provided convincing evidence that it is a centre of quality, offering excellence in both teaching and learning.

Umeå University, the Psychology Clinic

The Department of Psychology hosts the clinical psychology programme including the Psychology Clinic, which is placed directly under the responsibility of the Faculty of Social Sciences. The clinic, founded in 1988 to provide clients for those students training in therapy methods, falls within the regulatory framework and supervision of the National Board of Health and Welfare. In keeping with the Health and Medical Services Act, the clinic has a director, with responsibility for maintaining a high level of client confidentiality, quality care and treatment. In addition, the Director is responsible for managing staff and coordinating their activities with those of the Department. The Director reports directly to the Head of Department.

The activities of the Clinic are an integral part of the 5-year undergraduate clinical psychology programme. Students are introduced to the clinic in the first semester. They take part in a quality assurance course, and between the seventh and tenth semesters they undertake student-led therapy sessions.

Altogether, staffing amounts to 13.1 full-time equivalents (FTEs). Approximately 20 licensed psychotherapists are involved as supervisors for student-led therapy and other activities. Students participating in clinical activities number approximately 21 FTEs.

The purposive and comprehensive way in which both the organisation and procedures of the clinic were developed provides a first-rate setting for a clinical programme. The system of quality assurance is extensive and linked to supervision, but focuses on providing high-quality services to clients. However, it is not entirely clear how quality assurance of training maps onto that of the programme or to the department to which it belongs. The very favourable staff–student ratio has worked against written course evaluations. As such, documentation is important for the continuous improvement of students' education; this problem is now being addressed.

Administrative support seems very good. With integrated IT applications and services, infrastructure is customised to current needs as well as covering issues of security and confidentiality.

The management is competent and highly focused on the task in hand. However, it is one thing to have a 'vision' and another to take full account of how exactly the vision is to take root and to be sustained. A vision in which sustainability is largely assumed does not, in our view, make for excellence but qualifies rather as the *potential* for short-lived brilliance. Nor is intention always associated with capacity to realise the intent. Embarking on research is certainly to take the road that leads to excellence. But its recognition comes with acknowledged achievement, not with the stated intention alone. We listened carefully for indicators that would show that the issues involved in sustainability were present and foremost in the management agenda. A number of strategies are under discussion at department level to increase the number of staff members with double competency, for example by emphasising clinical experience in new recruitment. Our considered view is that this aspect

deserves greater attention than it appears to command at present. That said, management tries to take everybody's views and needs into account. Teachers are encouraged to take courses in teaching techniques. Most teaching staff have permanent positions and most of them have a PhD. The supervisors have special training in supervision. It is pleasing to note that teacher commitment seems to be remarkable.

Clearly, best practice is the main driving force of the clinic. As well as seeking to set standards for scientifically based therapy, the clinic also aims to become a leading light in its practice and development, and a vehicle for course development as well as teaching strategies. There are some indications that the clinic has attracted the attention of others.

Teaching and examination modes are defined clearly and are well attuned to the particular field and objectives of the programme. Continuous discussion of learning outcomes is built into the programme and its different examination modes. Student application in research and in the development of practical skills is supervised closely. Feedback from clients on the quality of treatment is also used very well as a means of quality assurance.

International benchmarking and exchange are modest, although national and regional dimensions are attended to and very important in the scope of the programme. There is potential to develop this aspect further, and disseminating results at other educational venues should be encouraged.

No systematic graduate surveys have been undertaken but good contact is said to be maintained with alumni, who frequently serve as supervisors on a contractual basis. The application states that almost all graduates become licensed psychologists. They do not have problems finding employment. However, no concrete statistics are presented.

Describing and analysing factors of educational success have been used to improve the programme. Collaboration with local therapy practices is set out less clearly. Neither the application nor the site visit confirms the presence of a strong research base.

In the application, evidence is present of the Clinic's ambition to excellence and the determination to become a role model for other university-run clinics where the blending of academic and professional training is desirable. Umeå's Psychology Clinic has good cause to be pleased with what it is achieving. But excellence, even when applied within the narrow confines of praxis, comes through voluntary and unsolicited recognition from external peers. The Clinic is unique in many aspects, but on balance neither the application nor the site visit provided convincing evidence that it is as yet a centre of sustained excellence in teaching and learning.

Umeå University, National Graduate School of Gender Studies

The National Graduate School of Gender Studies is one of the 16 national graduate schools launched in 2001 by the Swedish government. The aim was to develop new and more efficient forms for doctoral studies and to strengthen collaboration between Swedish higher-education institutions.

The School is part of the Umeå Centre for Gender Studies. Administratively, the centre belongs to the Faculty of Social Sciences. Management of the School is the responsibility of a director of studies, a research school coordinator and an administrative coordinator.

As of spring 2009, the total number of teachers engaged in education is 50, of whom 13 are full professors, 17 associate professors and 20 senior lecturers. Besides their involvement in supervision, there is no information about their commitment in terms of full-time equivalents.

The organisational structure is characterised by flexibility and continuity, with a small core leadership group. The infrastructure seems good, with seminar rooms, a social room and a small library, together with videoconferencing equipment.

Quality assurance has been interpreted in terms of wide-ranging skills and intellectual attitudes rather than the more usual and formal definition, which pertains to procedures and measurable goals. Some interesting approaches are used, such as the emphasis on intellectual enthusiasm, high standards in research and teaching together with meeting the challenge posed by an interdisciplinary environment.

An interdisciplinary committee of supervisors is in place, as are collaboration agreements with the departments in which doctoral students are based. The application also acknowledges, as does the Panel, the need to develop more articulate demands and standards for supervision than those already in situ, as well as strengthening evaluation routines in supervision.

Information about the degree of commitment to teacher education by the academic staff does not figure in the application, so the Panel can make no assessment about the student–teacher ratio, nor can it judge other indicators of teacher competence and capacity.

The setting itself is based on recent ideas about doctoral supervision, interdisciplinarity and best practice in terms of critical mass. This is a sound academic foundation for gender studies.

Doctoral students within the School have access to an excellent range of courses, with very wide multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary scope. They are well prepared in methodologies appropriate to their research. Over and above the courses, intensive meetings (lasting between three days and one week) are offered each term, in addition to the so-called mid-seminars halfway through the doctoral period, at which the students present their progress. Great care is taken to familiarise students with interdisciplinary aspects of research work and to prepare them for working together in research teams.

Student learning is fostered by offering a series of seminars in which reflection is encouraged, together with a questioning attitude. The seminars seek to integrate theoretical reflection and practical exercises to help students to develop a broad range of transferable skills. The seminars are impressive. Not only do they focus on intellectual skills, they also include the whole person, for example by offering topics such as ‘collaborative writing’, ‘posture, walk and expression’ and ‘entering and owning public space’.

Although the School provides individual examples of very substantial careers on graduation, the submission lacks any quantitative data. The statistics presented in the application do not provide an overview of how many doctoral students the School has accepted, how many have completed and over what time, still less how many have failed or dropped out. It seems that most graduates are now employed by Umeå University.

The application mentions some success factors, such as an education based on flexibility, interdisciplinary dialogue and high scientific and pedagogical competence, but lacks a systematic evaluation that shows why graduates have a competitive edge in the labour market.

The Graduate School of Gender Studies is most assuredly a unique unit. The interdisciplinary approach is the most important factor in its success, which leads on to other very positive aspects. In various ways the School provides very substantial backing and support to its students. There are many other positive features, some of which have been mentioned.

Nevertheless, the Panel is not wholly convinced by the application. International networking does not seem to lead to international exchange programmes, either for teachers or for students. Although internationalisation is listed as one of the School’s success factors, the Panel does not find evidence that its international activities are impressive for so large a unit. Quality assurance in supervision needs to be strengthened. Information about completion rates and time to graduation is likewise not included.

To be a Centre of Excellence in Higher Education requires excellence across the board and in many fields. In our estimation, the application from the National Graduate School of Gender Studies does not show fully that they meet this condition.

Appendix 1: Swedish Centres of Excellence in Higher Education 2009 – Quality Aspects as Guidelines for Evaluation

When selecting a department, study programme or organisational unit for the award of Centre of Excellence in Higher Education, Högskoleverket (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education) uses quality aspects, rather than fixed criteria, in the assessment process. These quality aspects are presented as statements about what constitutes excellence in education. They have been developed together with an international assessment panel and are used as guidelines for the submission of applications and for the assessment process. The process thus becomes transparent.

By using quality aspects rather than fixed criteria the award is able to

- include non-traditional and innovative units,
- avoid becoming too normative and,
- allow the department, study programme or organisational unit to define their own factors of success.

There is an educational setting, organisational structure and quality assurance system and infrastructure that functions exceptionally well.

- Is there an effective quality assurance system?
- Can the organisational structure be considered as optimal?
- Are work duties and responsibilities shared appropriately?
- Does the unit have the support of the higher-education institution as a whole?
- Does the unit receive support through its networks and vice versa?
- Does the administrative support provide continuity?

The organisation has a competent management and committed teachers with relevant knowledge, experience and ability.

- Is there a system for recognising and rewarding excellence in teaching?
- Is there a system for the professional development of staff?
- Does the teaching staff participate in international activities and exchanges?
- Is the student–teacher ratio well balanced?
- Is the unit prominent in comparison with similar environments?

The organisation has a sound academic or artistic foundation and is based on best practice.

- Is there a clear link between current research and development, and teaching?
- Are new research and new knowledge integrated into teaching quickly?
- Do students actively take part in research and development projects?
- The forms of teaching and examination are designed in accordance with learning objectives and expected outcome
- Are the forms of teaching and methods of assessment clearly defined?
- In what way do the methods of teaching and assessment contribute to achieving the objectives?
- How are learning outcomes defined and measured?
- Are the qualitative targets clear?
- Have other quality indicators been defined and, if so, in what way are they used?

The fostering of student learning is outstanding.

- Are there routines for gathering and evaluating the views of students?
- In what way does the unit respond to student needs and criticism?
- Are innovative and successful teaching methods being developed?
- Are degree projects externally examined or compared?
- Is there a shared culture of maintaining high standards?
- Is there adequate student support when required?
- Is there any national or international benchmarking?
- Are students encouraged to participate in international exchange programmes and visits to partner institutions?

Students achieve excellent results.

- Are indicators of student performance available, e.g. applicants per place, retention and completion rates?
- Are statistics available and in what way are they used, e.g. employment rates for graduates and continuation to doctoral studies?
- Are there other mechanisms for gaining feedback from alumni and, if so, what is the impact of this feedback?
- Are there any methods for measuring added value?

A centre of excellence describes and analyses factors of educational success and the reasons these lead to exceptional results.

- How are the factors that lead to success defined?
- Is there an interest in sharing results with others?
- What influence does the unit have on other environments for teaching and learning: locally, nationally and internationally?

Appendix 2: Beslut



Rektor
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BESLUT

2009-12-09
Reg.nr 649-5502-08

Utmärkelsen framstående utbildningsmiljö

Högskoleverket beslutar att tilldela Skolan för datavetenskap och kommunikation vid Kungl. Tekniska högskolan (KTH) Utmärkelsen framstående utbildningsmiljö 2009.

Beslut i detta ärende har fattats av ställföreträdande myndighetschefen Lena Adamson efter föredragning av utredaren Charlotte Elam i närvaro av informationschefen Eva Ferndahl och avdelningschefen Magnus Hjort. Beslutet grundar sig på bedömargruppens rapport.

Lena Adamson

Charlotte Elam

Kopia till:
Rektor, Umeå universitet
Utbildningsdepartementet