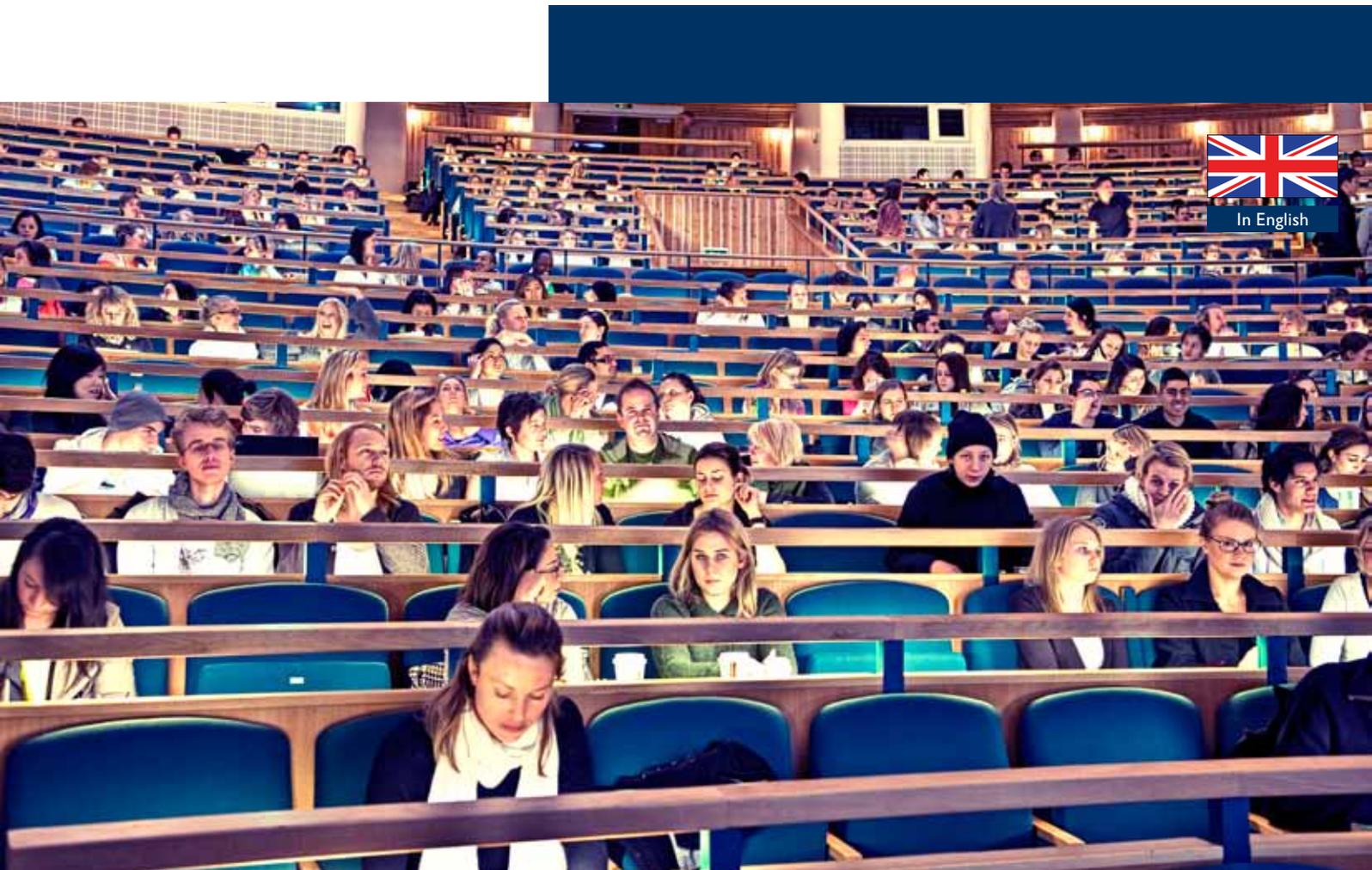


The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education's quality evaluation system 2011–2014



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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

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Assurance, **Magnus Hjort, Maria Sundkvist**

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Foreword

Never have there been as many students, teachers and researchers as today and never have the resources available to the higher education sector been as large. Nor have such high demands ever been made of education and research. These activities have gone from being the interest of a minority to one element in the everyday life of the majority of the population.

The world's higher education institutions play a central role in the development and welfare of both communities and individuals. It is important for the education they offer to maintain high standards, increasingly so against the background of the greater autonomy given to Swedish universities and university colleges. Internationalisation offers new possibilities but also gives rise to increasing competition and in this development Sweden must strengthen its position by competing on competence and quality. Greater autonomy is, in the Government's opinion, an important requirement if the higher education institutions are to be able to meet this competition and enhance their standards, but greater freedom must be accompanied by an effective system of quality evaluation.

In many countries it has become more and more important for higher education institutions to be able to account for the quality of the courses and programmes they offer, both to the Government authorities that provide their funding and to the individuals who invest in various ways in their own education. Confidence in each other's quality is also a requirement for any closer and more intensive collaboration between higher education institutions in different countries. Greater international mobility among both students and graduates increasingly demands verifiable proof of the quality of courses and study programmes.

It is always the institutions themselves that are responsible for their standards and they themselves decide how courses and study programmes are to be organised. In other words there are many different paths to the final destination – the award of a qualification. The task of the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education is to evaluate all higher education. No matter what route is taken, the standards must always be high enough to enable the outcomes laid down in the qualification descriptors to be attained.

The new quality evaluation system is intended to enable all potential students to choose between different courses and programmes that all maintain high quality standards. Their future employers must also know that the award of a qualification confirms that students have attained the knowledge required.

From 1 January 2011, therefore, the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education will evaluate programmes of study on the basis of how well they attain the requirements laid down in the Higher Education Act and the qualification descriptors in the ordinances associated with it.

The new quality evaluation system has been developed after discussions with the higher education institutions, the Association of Swedish Higher Education (SUHF), the Swedish National Union of Students and labour market representatives. We would like to thank all of them for their contributions to a process that has been constructive, although not always easy.

Stockholm, 21 December 2010

Lars Haikola

Magnus Hjort

Maria Sundkvist

Abstract

One of the tasks of the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education is to evaluate the results of courses and programmes. Here 'results' refers to how well the specific courses and programmes comply with the requirements laid down in the Higher Education Act and the qualification descriptors in the ordinances that are linked to it. The National Agency will assess to what extent students' achieved learning outcomes correspond to the intended learning outcomes.

The evaluations will be carried out by external assessment panels that include subject experts, students and practitioners. Their appraisals are based on the students' independent projects (degree projects), the higher education institution's own self-evaluations, questionnaires sent to previous students and the students' impression of the outcomes of their programmes of study in relationship to the outcomes laid down in the qualification descriptors. The students' independent projects together with the learning outcomes accounted for in the self-evaluations provide the main basis for the overall assessments. A three-level scale is used for these overall assessments and a small proportion of the funding allocated by the government may be based on them.

Courses and programmes that fail to meet the quality requirements for higher education may receive conditional extension of their entitlement to award a qualification. After one year the National Agency will conduct a review of this conditional extension and then decide whether or not this entitlement should be revoked completely.

Background and premises

The community has an interest in ensuring that the goals laid down for higher education institutions are attained and that their resources are used efficiently. It is reasonable for the outcomes of their operations, which are largely financed through public funding and which are central to the development of the community, to be evaluated regularly and for inspection and quality control to take place. In addition, students, the commercial sector, government agencies and other stakeholders need information about the quality of the courses and study programmes they offer.

All higher education must be based on scholarship or artistic practice and on proven experience.¹ Section 1 of Chapter 3 of the Higher Education Act stipulates that there must be close links between research and courses and study programmes. The Act also contains level descriptors (Sections 8–9 of Chapter 1) that lay down what characterises courses and study programmes in the different cycles.² The outcomes to be achieved on completion of study programmes for the award of the different qualifications can be found in the qualification descriptors (most of which are in Annex 2 to the Higher Education Ordinance). These provisions, together with the specific task entrusted to the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education described below, form the basis of the National Agency's evaluation of the quality of higher education.

The National Agency's task

The mandate given to the National Agency includes responsibility for quality assurance of higher education through quality evaluation of first, second and third-cycle courses and study programmes.

In March 2010 the Government presented the bill *Fokus på kunskap – kvalitet i den högre utbildningen* [*Focus on knowledge – quality in higher education*] which was enacted by the Riksdag on 3 June 2010.³ The Government's proposals and considerations were based on a policy that aims to grant the higher education institutions greater autonomy.⁴ One important premise is that the institutions themselves should take responsibility for the development and quality assurance of their activities. The responsibility for analysing their circumstances and processes should therefore rest with the institutions

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1. Higher Education Act Chapter 1, Section 2, Section 2 of the Act on Entitlement to Award Certain Qualifications (1993:792).
 2. Govt. Bill Ny värld – ny högskola [New world – new higher education] (2004/05:162) pp. 89–93.
 3. Govt. Bill 2009/10:139, bet. 2009/10:UbU20, rskr. 2009/10:320.
 4. See also the Govt. Bill En akademi i tiden [Academic education for today] (Govt. Bill 2009/10:149).

themselves. The national quality assurance system for which the National Agency is responsible should focus on the results of courses and study programmes and be intended to assess whether they achieve the outcomes laid down in the qualification descriptors in the ordinances linked to the Higher Education Act.⁵

On 8 July 2010 the Government directed the National Agency to develop and produce a quality evaluation system for first and second-cycle courses and study programmes to be based on the annex attached to the directive and the Government Bill *Fokus på kunskap – kvalitet i den högre utbildningen [Focus on knowledge – quality in higher education]* (Govt. Bill 2009/10:139). These evaluations are to be conducted by external assessment panels. The role of the National Agency is to coordinate the evaluations and ensure that they are transparent and equivalent. The evaluations are to provide a basis for review of entitlement to award a qualification and also for the Government's allocation of a small proportion of funding.

This document contains an overall presentation of the National Agency's quality evaluation system for 2011–2014.

Which programmes of study are to be evaluated?

The Government's directive applies to programmes of study that can lead to the award of a first or second-cycle qualification. Each evaluation is to result in an overall assessment on a three-level scale. The evaluation model to be used lays great weight on appraisal of the independent projects (degree projects). No specific number of credits is required, however, for the independent projects in programmes that last for two years or less. In addition, some study programmes have been established so recently that the higher education institutions have not yet been able to grade any independent projects. There are therefore good grounds for exempting some courses and study programmes from evaluation according to this model.

Exemption 1 – higher education diplomas and short vocational programmes

The evaluation model used by the National Agency places great emphasis on the appraisal of independent projects and is therefore less suitable for evaluating some short study programmes. The requirements for a number of higher education diplomas and short vocational education and training programmes admittedly include independent projects (degree projects), but there are no stipulations about the number of credits they are to comprise. For this reason the National Agency will only evaluate a selection of study programmes leading to the award of a two-year higher education diploma (general qualifica-

5. Higher Education Ordinance (1993:100) Annex 2, Annex to Ordinance for the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (1993:221) and Annex to Ordinance for the Swedish National Defence College (2007:1164).

tions or in the fine, applied or performing arts) or vocational qualifications that comprise 120 credits or less. These evaluations will be based on a model that focuses on outcomes and which uses independent projects as one of several material used for the evaluations.

Exemption 2 – newly established programmes

Great weight is attached to the independent projects (degree projects) in the quality evaluation system used by the National Agency. It will not therefore evaluate study programmes that have been established so recently that they have not yet had time to grade any independent projects on the basis of the qualification ordinance now in force. One example can be found in the teacher education programmes for which degree-awarding powers were granted for the first time in December 2010. It is incumbent on a higher education institution that has this kind of newly established study programme to inform the National Agency that it should be excluded from the evaluation together with the justification for doing so.

Third-cycle courses and study programmes

The directives given to the National Agency also require it to evaluate programmes leading to the award of third-cycle qualifications. The results of third-cycle evaluations will not, however, lead to any extra funding from the Government. The third cycle is not, therefore, officially included in the new system and the National Agency has greater freedom to decide how such evaluations should be organised, both in terms of methods and timing. There are, however, indications to suggest that third-cycle evaluation should be coordinated in many cases with first and second-cycle evaluations. The National Agency will continue development of its methods of evaluating third-cycle courses and study programmes and begin to coordinate evaluations in all three cycles when it is considered appropriate. This should be possible in 2012.

Studies that do not lead to the award of a qualification

The evaluation of study programmes or courses that do not lead to the award of a qualification will be organised differently. In January 2010 the National Agency was directed by the Government (U2009/427/UH) to determine which courses and study programmes that do not lead to the award of a qualification and to monitor a selection of them continuously on the basis of the requirements for higher education laid down in Sections 2 and 8–9 of Chapter 1 of the Higher Education Act. The National Agency submitted a report to the Government in November 2010 and during 2011 the Agency will decide how these courses and study programmes are to be evaluated.

Evaluation methods

In the 2011 quality evaluation system, the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education will assess the outcomes of courses and study programmes. It will do so by appraising the degree to which the students (and therefore their programmes of study) achieve the outcomes laid down in the qualification descriptors.⁶ The National Agency assesses the extent to which the students' achieved learning outcomes correspond to the intended learning outcomes. The outcomes in the qualification descriptors are listed under three headings: *knowledge and understanding*, *competence and skills*, and *judgement and approach*. For each evaluation a selection will be made of the outcomes laid down for the study programme concerned on which to base subsequent assessment of the material. The selection is to take into account the requirements laid down in Sections 2 and 8–9 of Chapter 1 of the Higher Education Act and it must moreover be ensured that, taken together, the outcomes chosen reflect both the specific and overall aspects of the courses or study programmes and their relevance on the labour market.⁷ The National Agency intends to lay down prior guidelines for how this selection is to take place for each evaluation to guarantee their equivalence.

Material to be assessed

The directive given to the National Agency by the Government on 8 July 2010 states that its evaluations are to be based on three factors: the students' independent projects, the self-evaluations submitted by the higher education institutions and questionnaires sent to existing students and alumni. The directive also states that there are methodological problems with the use of questionnaires and that the National Agency must therefore launch development measures to deal with these without delay. The development work undertaken by the National Agency since the autumn of 2010 shows that there is a great possibility that the response frequency to student questionnaires will be too low to ensure that they can be used in comparable ways. In a written submission to the Government the National Agency has pointed this out and proposed that student questionnaires should not necessarily form part of the material on which evaluations are based. Instead the experiences of students should be ascertained in some other way. Questionnaires to alumni should, however, continue to be included in the material used for the evaluations.

6. The qualification descriptors can be found in Annex 2 to the Higher Education Ordinance (1993:100), the Annex to the Ordinance for the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (1993:221) and the Annex to the Ordinance for the Swedish National Defence College (2007:1164).

7. See Govt. Bill 2009/10:139 p. 17 (on the distinctive features of study programmes) and pp.20–21 (on employability).

The students' independent projects

The reform of the system of qualifications in 2007 involved the introduction of the requirement of an independent project (degree project) for the award of virtually every qualification.⁸

Several Government Bills and the directive given to the National Agency emphasises the central importance of the independent projects in confirming that students have achieved the outcomes required for the award of a qualification.⁹

It is important to point out that this appraisal does not constitute any review of the grades given by the examiners. It is rather intended to enable assessment of the results of a study programme on the basis of the outcomes laid down in the relevant qualification descriptor. It is the aggregate quality of the programme's independent projects that are to provide the basis of the evaluation and not specific excellent or poor productions.

The National Agency considers that in many cases an appraisal of the students' independent projects offers a good impression of how well the students have achieved many of the outcomes laid down in the qualification descriptors, in particular for programmes leading to the award of a general qualification. These individual projects cannot, however, form the sole basis for appraisal as programmes can include outcomes that independent projects cannot be expected to display. It is therefore important to use other material as well in the national evaluations.

During the evaluations a random selection of no more than 24 independent projects will be appraised for each programme evaluated. The sample projects need to be anonymised through the removal of information about both their authors and the higher education institutions submitting them.

The higher education institutions' self-evaluations

The self-evaluations submitted by the higher education institution serve two purposes. The first, and most important, is to enable a broader and more comprehensive presentation of outcomes than the independent projects can offer. This is because the independent projects cannot comprise all the outcomes to be achieved for the award of a specific qualification. In their self-evaluations, therefore, the institutions should present, analyse and assess the outcomes achieved in relation to all the outcomes to be taken into account in the evaluation. These presentations are intended to show the assessors that the students (and therefore the study programmes) are achieving the outcomes laid down in the qualification descriptors. They should therefore include explicit evidence that outcomes are achieved rather than references to the conditions and processes intended to lead to their achievement, such as course syllabuses. Some presentation of the conditions and processes may however be made to enable

8. An exception is the Higher Education Diploma in Vocational Education.

9. Ny värld – ny högskola (Govt. Bill 2004/05:162) and Fokus på kunskap – kvaliteten i den högre utbildningen (Govt. Bill 2009/10:139).

an institution to describe how it guarantees that students really achieve these outcomes.

The other purpose is to account for and explain circumstances that have manifest significance for the results of a programme of study. One circumstance of this kind comprises the teaching resources used in the programme under evaluation. For this reason the institutions' self-evaluations should present information about the qualifications of the teachers and their availability and also analyse this information in relation to the outcomes that apply for the award of the qualification in question.

The higher education institutions also have a possibility to account for and analyse relevant information about their students' preconditions and present arguments about how this has affected the outcomes of a programme of study. The tariff value of the students' grades on admission can provide a picture of their possibilities of achieving the outcomes of a programme. If a presentation of this kind is to influence the overall assessment, the institution should be able to show that there are manifest differences in the circumstances of its students in comparison with equivalent programmes of study at other higher education institutions.

More detailed information about how the self-evaluations are to be carried out will be given in the guidelines to be produced by the National Agency.

Students' experiences

Students' experiences of the studies they complete offer an important supplement to the analysis of the independent projects and the results and analyses presented in the self-evaluations. For this reason, data to illustrate the students' view of the outcomes of their studies in relation to the outcomes laid down in the qualification descriptors will be collected. This may, for instance, take the form of structured group interviews with students approaching the end of their studies.

Alumni questionnaires

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

Alumni questionnaires are sent primarily to students who graduated two years prior to the evaluation. They can then be assumed to have gained labour market experience while at the same time their studies are not too distant. Questionnaires are sent to students from programmes that have at least 20 alumni.¹⁰ The results of questionnaires to alumni in programmes where the response rate is lower than 50 per cent will not be taken into account.

10. If the number of alumni is lower, those who graduated three years prior to the evaluation are included followed by those who graduated one year earlier. Questionnaires will not be sent to alumni from programmes from which fewer than 20 students graduated in the preceding three years.

Both the higher education institutions and labour market representatives have a long tradition of conducting questionnaire surveys of alumni. The National Agency will encourage cooperation on these questionnaires to avoid questionnaire fatigue among the informants.

A three- level scale for the overall assessment

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

Very high quality The study programme displays a very high degree of achievement of outcomes.
High quality The study programme displays a high degree of achievement of outcomes.
Inadequate quality The study programme displays serious shortcomings.

Section 14 of Chapter 1 of the Higher Education Act stipulates that courses and study programmes that display serious shortcomings and are therefore given the lowest grade (inadequate quality) must be given some time to remedy these shortcomings. If the shortcomings then persist, the National Agency may decide to revoke entitlement to award a qualification as laid down in the same section. According to the provisions of the Act on Entitlement to Award Certain Qualifications (1993:792), a decision to revoke the entitlement of an independent education provider to award a qualification is made by the Government on the recommendation of the National Agency. Before such a recommendation is made, the independent education provider must have been given the opportunity to remedy matters (Section 7). Different overall assessments can also be made of different specialisations within the same qualification, if these specialisations have distinctive features and are offered at a number of higher education institutions. The Government Bill *Fokus på kunskap – kvalitet i den högre utbildningen* [Focus on knowledge – quality in higher education] (Govt. Bill 2009/10: 139) cites master's programmes in engineering as examples of study programmes where it is possible to make overall assessments of different specialisations.

Weighting the different assessment material

The students' independent projects together with the learning outcomes accounted for in the self-evaluations are to provide most of the material on which the overall assessment is based. In cases where appraisal of the independent projects clearly shows how well certain outcomes have been achieved, great weight should be assigned to these results in evaluating achievement of these outcomes.

It is more than probable that some outcomes cannot be assessed on the basis of the independent projects. This makes it impossible to say in advance that the independent projects should always carry most weight when the evaluations are made or what the relative weighting of the independent projects and the self-evaluations should be. This will be different for different programmes of study and for different higher education institutions and cannot be clearly discerned before the evaluation has been made.¹¹ The principle should however be that if appraisal of the independent projects offers clear results for specific outcomes, this should be afforded great significance in the assessment of achievement of these outcomes.

Assessment of teachers' qualifications and the availability of teachers in the courses or study programmes can also affect the overall assessment. If a programme is awarded the lowest grade in the evaluation, assessment of the teachers' qualifications and their availability should also provide guidance on the measures that the higher education institution should adopt.

Another circumstance that, in special cases, could influence the overall assessment is whether the circumstances of the students have been shown to have a manifest impact on the outcomes of a programme of study. For this reason, when justifiable, these circumstances should be taken into account and affect the overall assessment when two different grades are in the balance. It is then necessary, however, for the analysis presented by the higher education institution to have shown the probability that this has had a manifest impact on the outcomes of the programme of study.

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

11. The alternative, which is for the National Agency to decide in advance that the results of appraisals of the independent projects should always carry most weight irrespective of which outcomes are being assessed, would probably lead to undesirable homogeneity in higher education.

The evaluation process

The composition and work of the assessment panels

The assessment panels consist of three categories of assessors: subject experts, students and practitioners. The assessment 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 evaluated. The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education endeavours to maintain a gender balance in the assessment panels as well as major representation of experts from other countries. The higher education institutions have the possibility of nominating subject experts. Similarly, practitioners are nominated by appropriate organisations in the labour market and the students by the student unions. The decision on who to include in an assessment panel is, however, made by the National Agency.

In preparation for the new evaluation system the National Agency has taken steps to quality assure the evaluation process by developing explicit principles and routines for the assessment panels. These apply, for instance, to the potential partiality that may result from links between the experts and the courses and study programmes to be evaluated. It is also important to provide the experts with information and an introduction to the evaluation process to ensure equivalence and transparency.

The next step in the evaluation process is for the assessors to draw up a proposal on the outcomes to be evaluated as well as evaluation-specific criteria for this appraisal. This proposal is then discussed at a start-up meeting with representatives of the courses and study programmes to be evaluated. Documentation is sent to the higher education institutions in advance so that they have every possibility of reviewing the outcomes and criteria that have been selected. At the start-up meeting they are able to offer their opinions on the proposal drawn up by the assessment panel. The National Agency then decides which outcomes are to be included in the evaluation as well as the criteria that are to apply.

Coordination meeting

In order to demonstrate the relevance of the courses and study programmes to the labour market it is important that spokesmen for the labour market are involved in the evaluations. This is made possible partly through the inclusion of practitioners in the assessment panels and also through coordination meetings with other practitioners arranged by the National Agency. These meetings can, for instance, include discussion of the outcomes in the qualification descriptors for the courses and study programmes to be evaluated. The assessment 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 National Agency circulates guidelines on how to organise the self-evaluations and submission of independent projects. Representatives of the courses and study programmes to be evaluated are responsible for ensuring that the anonymised independent projects (degree projects) and self-evaluations are submitted to the National Agency. The National Agency is responsible for making the material to be appraised available to the assessors.

Site visits

Site visits, i.e. meetings between representatives of the assessment panels and representatives of the courses and study programmes to be evaluated, are one component of the National Agency's national evaluation system. 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 to be based. In this way the site visits offer a greater penetration of the programmes evaluated and help to ensure that the final judgement is firmly based. Site visits should therefore be 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.

Site visits are time-consuming and costly for both the National Agency and the higher education institutions. For this reason it should be possible to arrange them in the form of Internet or video conferences where the technological facilities exist. Site visits should, however, be arranged as far as possible in the same way within each individual evaluation.

The terms 'site visit' is used to refer to the meetings between the assessors and the representatives of the higher education institutions irrespective of whether they take place on campus, at some other venue or with the aid of some technological facilities.

The assessment panel's report to the National Agency

The assessment panel has to submit its proposed overall assessment of each course or study programme using a 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 assessment panel.

The National Agency's decision

On the basis of the assessment panel's report, the National 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* attain the quality standards required for higher education. Those that fail

to attain the required standards for higher education are given the evaluation *Inadequate quality*. In this case the National 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 National Agency decides whether or not the entitlement to award the qualification should be revoked completely.

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 assurance, supervision, monitoring and the development of higher education, studies and analyses, the evaluation of qualifications from abroad and information for students.

More information on our website www.hsv.se.