

# Guidelines for the Evaluation of First- and Second-Cycle Programmes



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# Introduction

These guidelines show how the Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ) evaluates first- and second-cycle programmes at Swedish higher education institutions. The guidance is based on the national system for the quality assurance of higher education and research.

Universities and HEIs in Sweden are responsible for ensuring that education and research are of high quality. UKÄ's role is to ensure that the universities and HEIs fulfil their responsibility for quality and therefore conduct various types of reviews. The overall goal of UKÄ's reviews is to help to ensure that the education and research conducted at universities and HEIs in Sweden maintains a high quality. Provisions on UKÄ's responsibility for quality assurance of the activities of universities and HEIs are found in Sections 1 and 2 of Regulation (2012:810) with instructions for the Swedish Higher Education Authority.

UKÄ conducts the following reviews:

- Appraisals of applications for degree-awarding powers.
- Reviews of the quality assurance work of higher education institutions.
- Programme evaluations.
- Thematic evaluations.

When appraising applications for degree-awarding powers, UKÄ reviews whether the higher education institution offers a high-quality education. When reviewing the quality assurance work of higher education institutions, UKÄ assesses whether the work conducted by the institution ensures that its education and research maintain a high level of quality. In programme evaluations, UKÄ assesses whether selected programmes maintain a high level of quality, while in thematic evaluations quality is assessed within a specific area across higher education institutions.

UKÄ's reviews are based on the provisions of the Swedish Higher Education Act (SFS 1992:1434) and Higher Education Ordinance (SFS 1993:100), the government written communication *The quality assurance of higher education* (2015/16:76, 2015/16: UbU9, written communication from the Riksdag 2015/16:155) and the *European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher*

*Education Area*<sup>1</sup>, as well as national and international guidelines on research<sup>2</sup>. You can learn more about the national system for quality assurance on the UKÄ website.

The method has been developed in consultation with higher education institutions, the Swedish National Union of Students (SFS) and employer and professional organisations, as well as in dialogue with UKÄ's reference groups and selected members of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

These guidelines cover the points of departure for and purpose of programme evaluations, the knowledge-based selection and method, the various stages of the process and the main content of programme evaluations. Before each evaluation, UKÄ prepares instructions and supplementary information concerning the specific content of the evaluation, its structure and timetable.

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<sup>1</sup> *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*, 2015. UKÄ has also commissioned a Swedish translation, *Standarder och riktlinjer för kvalitetssäkring inom det europeiska området för högre utbildning (ESG)*, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> *The European Charter for Researchers and Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers* and the national framework for quality assurance of research developed by the Association of Swedish Higher Education Institutions (SUHF).

# Evaluations of first- and second-cycle programmes

In this section, we discuss the points of departure for and purpose of programme evaluations, how UKÄ chooses which programmes are to be evaluated and our efforts to ensure that our evaluations enhance quality.

## Points of departure and purpose

Pursuant to the Higher Education Act and Higher Education Ordinance, all higher education in Sweden shall maintain a high level of quality. Higher education institutions are responsible for the quality assurance of their first-, second- and third-cycle courses and programmes. UKÄ is responsible for conducting evaluations of a sample of the programmes offered by Swedish higher education institutions<sup>3</sup>.

The purpose of UKÄ's programme evaluations is to both check the results of programmes – i.e., that they meet the requirements and high standards prescribed in the Higher Education Ordinance – and to contribute to enhancing the quality of the higher education institution's courses and programmes.

Evaluations examine the quality of programmes, with the emphasis on how the programme provides students with good opportunities to achieve the qualitative target (System of Qualifications, Annex 2 to the Higher Education Ordinance) for the award of a degree.

## Knowledge-based selection

UKÄ selects a sample of the programmes for evaluation. The selection is based on the knowledge and experience accumulated from our previous quality reviews, efficiency analyses, statistics and supervisory cases, as well as our monitoring of the sector and dialogue with higher education institutions.

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<sup>3</sup> *The quality assurance of higher education* (2015/16:76, pp. 15–19).

UKÄ initiates a programme evaluation for the following reasons:

- We have reason to believe that there is a risk that a specific programme is failing to meet statutory requirements.
- We have reason to believe that more knowledge is required about a programme in order to, for example, illuminate the challenges and need for development at a national level. UKÄ has a specific focus on programmes leading to a professional qualification<sup>4</sup>.

The Government may also task UKÄ with conducting an evaluation in order to, for example, obtain a picture of the national situation on which to base a decision, or to follow up a given programme.

Evaluations of one or more programmes may also be conducted at a single higher education institution or at all higher education institutions to provide a national overview of the quality of a given programme.

In order to be exempted from an evaluation, the higher education institution must submit a decision to discontinue the programme in question before the evaluation begins. A programme may also be exempted from an evaluation if no new students have been admitted to the programme at the higher education institution for the last two years. The higher education institution must then submit an account of why no new students have been admitted to the programme during that period.

## Quality-enhancing evaluations

UKÄ strives to design and implement programme evaluations so that they enhance the quality of programmes and fields of study in greatest need of improvement and where the benefits will be greatest.

We therefore adapt our programme evaluations so that they address the most pressing challenges and needs within the programme to be evaluated. Such an adaptation is made prior to every evaluation and applies to all programmes included in the evaluation.

Programme evaluations shall complement and support the quality assurance work at each higher education institution and be resource-efficient. Evaluations are based on assessment criteria with targeted questions, in order to create space for higher education institutions to describe and evaluate its programme based on its own conditions and profile. This is intended to ensure that evaluations are closely related to the programme and enhance quality.

Another important aspect in ensuring that evaluations enhance quality is dialogue between the involved parties. This includes dialogue to decide

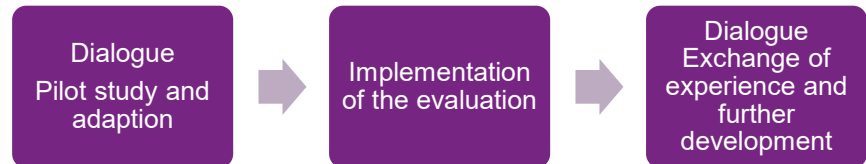
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<sup>4</sup> *The quality assurance of higher education* (2015/16:76, p. 16).

which programmes should be evaluated, to adapt the content and implementation of the evaluation to needs, and to increase the exchange of knowledge and experience concerning the evaluated programme.

Programme evaluations should create added value for the higher education institution's organisation. Developing the programme is both a common objective and the long-term effect of the evaluation process.

The flowchart illustrates the main elements of the evaluation process:





# Dialogue: Pilot study and adaption



In this section, we discuss the pilot study conducted by UKÄ and how UKÄ adapts the design and implementation of the evaluation to needs.

## Pilot study

Before beginning an evaluation, UKÄ will conduct a pilot study, the results of which will be reported to the assessment group and representatives of the higher education institutions, students and employer and professional organisations.

The pilot study builds on the knowledge of the programme that UKÄ has prepared prior to selecting the programmes to be evaluated. The scope of the pilot study varies depending on how many programmes are included in the evaluation and whether the intention is to provide a national overview of the programme. The pilot study includes a compilation of UKÄ's knowledge about the programme. It also includes statistics, such as the number of applicants per place, the number of admitted full-time equivalent students, the number of degrees awarded, student completion, establishment and, if possible, an overview of staff and research activities associated with the education activities. The statistics are prepared to provide an overview of any special circumstances that should be considered.

The pilot study also contains a compilation of results and analyses from previous reviews and government assignments undertaken by UKÄ. Compilations of current trends and needs may also be included to increase knowledge about the programme.

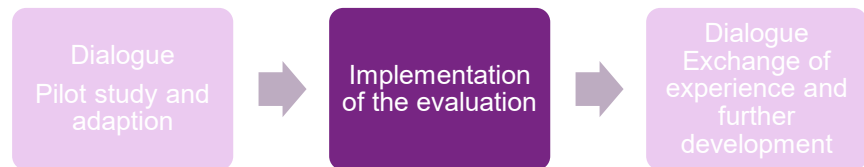
## Adaption

Based on the pilot study, UKÄ will hold a first dialogue meeting with assessors and representatives of the higher education institutions, students and employer and professional organisations concerning how the content and implementation of the evaluation should be adapted to best meet the need to develop the programme, and to ensure that the evaluation is fit for purpose. To this end, the dialogue meeting will address which qualitative targets or programme objectives should be evaluated and why. The meeting will also discuss whether there is anything else that should be considered in the implementation of a specific programme evaluation and what other documents should be considered in addition to self-evaluations and interviews.

The dialogue meeting also provides an opportunity to discuss whether there are any specific areas of the programme in which several higher education institutions face common challenges. If so, UKÄ may invite the institutions to attend a workshop to highlight the challenges and facilitate the exchange of experiences and solutions. For further information, please refer to the section “Exchange of experience and focus areas”.

After the pilot study and dialogue meeting, UKÄ will decide on the structure of the evaluation and which qualitative targets should be included.

# Implementation of the evaluation



In this section, we discuss the method and main content of the evaluation, which documents will be included, the opinion and decision and the follow-up of the programme evaluation.

The evaluation begins with a kick-off meeting attended by representatives of UKÄ and the higher education institutions, at which UKÄ informs about the content and implementation of the programme evaluation and provides clarification of any uncertainties.

## Collegial review

The method used for programme evaluation is based on collegial review by an assessment group, which will review and assess the documents on which evaluation is based. The assessment group consists of external independent experts, student representatives and representatives of employer and professional organisations.

## Recruitment

UKÄ recruits the assessment group and introduces the members to the assignment prior to the first dialogue meeting. Recruitment is preceded by a nomination process in collaboration with the higher education institutions, student unions (via the Swedish National Union of Students (SFS)) and employer and professional organisations. UKÄ appoints assessment groups. Between them, the members of the assessment group shall have sufficiently broad and in-depth expertise to evaluate the programme based on all assessment criteria included in the evaluation.

Higher education institutions have the opportunity to offer an opinion on the composition of the assessment group, including the subject knowledge of the experts or any conflicts of interest, before UKÄ confirms the appointments.

## Competence and roles

External experts must have good knowledge and experience of the subject area and the design of the programme to be evaluated. External experts assess all of the assessment criteria.

Student representatives bring a student's perspective to the assessment of all assessment criteria. For example, on types of instruction and contact with staff.

Representatives of employer and professional organisations assess the usefulness of the programme in preparing students for working life in relation to the chosen qualitative targets.

The combined knowledge and experience of external experts, student representatives and representatives of employer and professional organisations is the basis for the assessment group's joint assessment. The assessment group's opinion then forms the basis for UKÄ's decision.

The assessment group also plays an important role during pre- and post-evaluation dialogue meetings, not least in conveying lessons in the form of good examples and development needs.

UKÄ appoints the assessment group's chairperson who, together with UKÄ, leads the evaluation.

## Assessment of the programmes preconditions, design, implementation and results.

The emphasis of a programme evaluation is the actual conditions and results of the programme, i.e., does it meet statutory requirements. The evaluation therefore focuses on whether the programme provides students with good opportunities to achieve the qualitative target in the System of Qualifications for the award of a degree. The evaluation shall also be conducted in a manner that contributes to the development of the programme.

An assessment is made of how the programme is designed, implemented and examined to ensure that students have every opportunity to achieve the qualitative target. An assessment is also made of whether it provides the preconditions to ensure goal attainment. Part of the assessment is highlighting both good examples and room for improvement in order to enhance the quality of the evaluated programme.

In terms of preconditions, an assessment is made of *staff resources*. In terms of design, implementation and results, an assessment is made of the qualitative targets selected for the evaluation for the three outcomes

*knowledge and understanding, competence and skills, and judgement and approach.* The types of knowledge included in evaluations may vary.

### **Assessment criteria**

A programme evaluation is based on assessment criteria in the areas *staff resources* and *goal attainment*. Each assessment criterion is followed by evaluation questions to make it easier to describe, analyse and evaluate how the assessment criterion is fulfilled using concrete example.

Evaluation questions provide the opportunity to begin from the institution's conditions and profiles, helping to make the assessment more relevant from a control and development perspective. The assessment criteria are the same for every programme included in the same evaluation.

The assessment group assesses each of the criteria, after which it makes a combined assessment of all assessment criteria to arrive at an overall grade.

### **Assessment of staff resources**

#### **Assessment criteria**

The research/artistic, teaching and professional expertise of teaching staff is adequate and proportional to the volume and content of the programme. The competence of teaching staff is utilised so that students can achieve the qualitative target.

#### **Evaluation questions**

- What research/artistic, teaching and professional expertise do the teaching staff that students come into contact with during the programme have?
- How does the higher education institute utilise the research/artistic, teaching and professional expertise of teaching staff in the programme so that students can achieve the qualitative target?

In its self-evaluation, the higher education institution shall describe, analyse and evaluate the teaching expertise and capacity that students encounter in teaching, supervision and examinations during the programme. The emphasis is on the group of teachers responsible for the majority of instruction and that the students meet most often. Self-evaluation is supplemented by a report using the template in the appendix to the self-evaluation.

### **Assessment of goal attainment**

#### **Assessment criterion**

The programme is designed and implemented in such a way that, on being awarded a degree, the students have achieved the chosen qualitative targets in the outcomes *knowledge and understanding, competence and skills, and judgement and approach*.

#### **Evaluation questions**

- On graduating, what knowledge and skills should the student have attained for the qualitative targets? Specify how chosen qualitative targets have been broken down into intended learning outcomes.
- How was the programme implemented to ensure that students have good opportunities to achieve the qualitative targets?
- How do you ensure that students have achieved the qualitative targets?

In its self-evaluation, the higher education institution shall describe, analyse and evaluate goal attainment for the qualitative targets for each outcome. For example, this can be done by describing how qualitative targets, intended learning outcomes, learning activities and examinations are linked so that students can achieve a qualitative target, as well as the students' progression. This description can also include grading criteria and how these are applied, pedagogical models and activities and how students' learning is supported.

## **Basis for assessment**

The basis for assessment is the higher education institution's self-evaluation, including appendices, first- and second-cycle degree projects or equivalent documentation, interviews with representatives of the evaluated programme and with students. All documentation is considered in the assessment.

### **The higher education institution's self-evaluation**

Self-evaluation is a tool that provides the higher education institution with an opportunity to make visible, increase knowledge about and develop the quality of the programme. We therefore encourage higher education institutions to use the self-evaluation process as an opportunity to develop their organisation and involve staff working in and around the programme and students enrolled in the programme.

A self-evaluation begins with the higher education institution briefly describing the background of the programme and anything specific that it feels the assessors should be aware of if they are to obtain a greater understanding, such as if the programme is offered as distance education.

In its self-evaluation, the higher education institution describes, analyses and evaluates its own programme based on the evaluation questions. The aim is to provide concrete examples to give the clearest, fairest possible

picture of how the programme ensures that students have good opportunities to achieve the qualitative target, and how teaching expertise contributes to this. The higher education institution also describes the programme's strengths and weaknesses, and how these are dealt with.

As an appendix to the self-evaluation, the higher education institution also submits a report (template provided) on the staff who teach, examine and supervise the students in the programme.

The higher education institution may also refer to existing documents in its self-evaluation – i.e., documents not prepared specifically for the evaluation – to support its conclusions. For example, course and programme syllabuses, study guides, goal matrices and agreements. It is important that the self-evaluation contains clear references to where in such documents the cited evidence can be found. The documents to be included are decided in dialogue with the higher education institutions at the joint dialogue meeting.

### **Degree projects**

Degree projects are an important basis for assessing the attainment of the goals for the award of each degree. As such, a selection of students' degree projects that received a passing grade may be included in the assessment documentation. As an alternative to degree projects, UKÄ may request the submission of some other existing documentation, in which case this will be done in dialogue with the higher education institutions.

### **Interviews**

The assessment group interviews teachers, management and students involved in the programme.

The purpose of these interviews is to supplement the picture the assessors obtain from the other documentation. They also afford assessors the opportunity to ensure that they have interpreted the information correctly. Interviews are also an opportunity to meet assessors and provide any clarification and supplementation of the information in the self-evaluation and other documents.

The purpose of student interviews is to complement the other documents with the experience of students concerning how the programme is working and the extent to which it provides them with good conditions for achieving the qualitative target. Students who are interviewed should be close to the end of or recent graduates from the programme. The students should primarily be nominated by a student organisation that either belongs to or is itself a recognised student union at the higher education institution. Should student unions prove unable to ensure a successful recruitment process, UKÄ will ensure that students are

recruited as interviewees in consultation with the quality coordinator or some other person appointed by the higher education institution.

## Opinion and decision

The assessment group will issue an opinion concerning its evaluation of the programme. The assessment is based on all of the documentation submitted: the self-evaluation, including appendices, degree projects and equivalent documents, and interviews. In the opinion, the assessors will provide feedback to the higher education institution concerning the good examples and room for improvement identified in the assessment, both in relation to the assessment criteria and the programme in general.

The assessment group's preliminary opinion will be sent to the higher education institution for distribution. This is intended to provide the higher education institution with the opportunity to point out any factual errors in the opinion. The higher education institution's response will be included as an appendix to the opinion. The final opinion will then be the basis for UKÄ's decision.

Every programme evaluation results in a decision by UKÄ, which will assess the programme on a two-point grading scale:

- High quality
- Under review

If the overall assessment is that the programme is of questionable quality, the programme will be placed under review. The decision will include a report on the deficiencies identified by the assessment group that the higher education institution is required to rectify within one year.

## Re-examination

A higher education institution may request the re-examination of UKÄ's decision, in which case UKÄ will appoint a separate expert group to prepare the matter. The purpose of the expert group is to review the case to see whether there were any flaws in the original evaluation process. The expert group does not assess substantive issues, only the previous evaluation process at UKÄ<sup>5</sup>.

## Follow-up

A higher education institution that has had its programme placed under review has one year to remedy deficiencies and submit a report of the measures taken, whereupon UKÄ will appoint an assessment group to review the report. If the assessment group feels that the information

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<sup>5</sup> *Guidelines for re-examining decisions concerning the quality assurance of higher education*

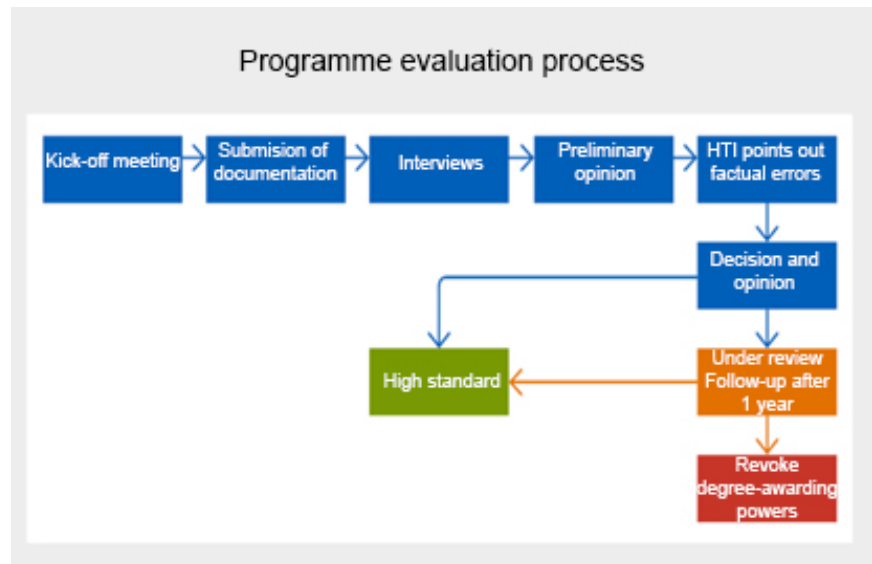


contained in the report is insufficient for the purpose of making a judgement, it may request supplementary documentation and an interview. Once the assessment group is happy that it has a sufficient information, it will assess the measures taken and submit an opinion to UKÄ.

Based on the assessment group's opinion, UKÄ will decide whether the programme is now of a high standard or if the higher education institution's degree-awarding powers are to be revoked. UKÄ is mandated to reach such a decision concerning higher education institutions of which the Swedish state is the accountable authority, with the exception of the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences and Swedish Defence University. In the case of independent higher education providers and the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences and Swedish Defence University, UKÄ will forward the assessment group's opinion and a statement of its own position to the Government for a decision.

If degree-awarding powers are revoked for a higher education institution of which the Swedish state is the accountable authority, the institution may still award degrees to students who were admitted to the programme before the decision was made<sup>6</sup>.

The diagram below describes the implementation of a programme evaluation:



<sup>6</sup> Chapter 1 Section 14 Higher Education Act

# Dialogue: Exchange of experience and further development



In this section we look at the occasions on which all involved in a programme evaluation have the opportunity to exchange experiences and reflect on how the programme can be further developed.

## Exchange of experience and focus areas

Every programme evaluation includes opportunities for representatives of higher education institutions, students and employer and professional organisations involved in the evaluation to exchange experiences. In a programme evaluation involving many higher education institutions, the purpose of which is to obtain a national overview of programmes, UKÄ may invite all involved to attend a workshop on one focus area before the evaluation takes place. It is important to underline that discussions of a focus area during a workshop are not part of the basis on which programmes are assessed.

At the first dialogue meeting, there is a discussion of whether there are any specific areas of the programme in which several higher education institutions face common challenges and that therefore merit special attention. For example, structural challenges shared by all institutions, such as available placements or adequate competence among teachers. There may also be general areas that offer development opportunities, such as student-centred learning, distance education, internationalisation or gender equality.

Together with the assessment group and in dialogue with the higher education institutions, UKÄ may even take the initiative to arrange a similar workshop after the evaluation. This may be appropriate if the results of the evaluation show that higher education institutions face certain common challenges.

The purpose of both workshops is to reveal common challenges, to obtain an overview of the work of higher education institutions in the area in question and to facilitate the discussion of experiences and potential solutions that may further the development of the programme. UKÄ compiles and presents the points of view and proposals that emerge at workshops to provide a national overview of the programme and to benefit development.

## **Exchange of experience and further development**

All programme evaluations involve a final opportunity for dialogue between those involved in the evaluation, so they can meet to share lessons learned, development needs and good examples that have emerged during the process. This dialogue meeting also provides an opportunity to ask questions of the assessment group and UKÄ.

UKÄ may also perform an in-depth analysis of the results of the evaluation, in order to increase national knowledge about a programme and promote its development.

The form that dialogue takes may change from one evaluation to another.

The Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ) is tasked with strengthening higher education in Sweden and assuring Sweden's status as a knowledge society. We review the quality of higher education, analyse and follow up developments in the higher education sector and monitor legal certainty for students.

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