

The Swedish Higher Education Authority

Self-Assessment Report for the ENQA Agency Review
2025



The Swedish Higher Education Authority

Self-Assessment Report for the ENQA Agency Review 2025

Published by Swedish Higher Education Authority 2025

Authors: Ulf Hedbjörk, Andreas Boberg, Ida Hughes Tidlund

Registration Number: UKÄ 00267-24-6

Swedish Higher Education Authority • Hammarbybacken 31 • 6024, 121 06 Johanneshov
phone +46 8 563 085 00 • e-mail registrator@uka.se • www.uka.se

Contents

Preface	6
1. Introduction	7
2. Development of the self-assessment report	8
3. Higher education and QA of higher education in Sweden.....	10
3.1. Higher Education in Sweden.....	10
3.1.1. Qualifications	13
3.1.2. Admission to Higher Education	13
3.1.3. Admission to Third-Cycle Education	14
3.2. Higher Education Providers in Sweden.....	14
3.3. Governance of Higher Education in Sweden	15
3.4. Quality Assurance and Evaluation of Higher Education in Sweden .	17
4. History, profile and activities of UKÄ.....	18
4.1. The Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ)	18
4.1.1. Three main areas of operation.....	18
4.2. International activities.....	20
4.3. Organisation.....	23
4.4. Historical overview of quality assurance activities.....	25
5. Profile, functioning and (EQA) activities of UKÄ (compliance with Part 3 of the ESG).....	27
5.1. ESG 3.1 Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance	27
5.2. ESG Standard 3.2 Official status.....	30
Reflections	31
Supporting documents.....	31
5.3. ESG Standard 3.3 Independence	32
Reflections	34
Supporting documents.....	34
5.4. ESG Standard 3.4 Thematic analysis	35
5.4.1. Thematic analysis of assessment results.....	35
5.4.2. Planning for analysis.....	36
Reflections	36
List of thematic analyses published since the previous ENQA review 2020.....	37
Supporting documents	39
5.5. ESG Standard 3.5 Resources	40
5.5.1. Financial resources.....	40
5.5.2. Human resources.....	41
Reflections	43

Supporting documents.....	44
5.6. ESG Standard 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct	44
Management system.....	44
Quality Policy	47
Communication and dialogue.....	48
Professional conduct.....	50
Reflections	50
Supporting documents.....	52
5.7. ESG Standard 3.7 Cyclical external review of agencies	53
6. Design and implementation of UKÄ's EQA activities (compliance with Part 2 of the ESG).....	55
6.1. ESG Standard 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance	55
Reflections	59
Supporting documents.....	60
6.2. ESG Standard 2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose	61
6.2.1. Institutional reviews.....	62
6.2.2. Programme evaluations	64
6.2.3. Appraisal of applications for degree-awarding powers.....	67
6.2.4. Thematic evaluations	69
6.2.5. Design and fitness for purpose of UKÄ's external quality assurance activities.....	70
6.2.6. Methodological development	70
6.2.7. Revision of methodology.....	72
Reflections	75
Supporting documents.....	76
6.3. ESG Standard 2.3 Implementing processes	78
6.3.1. Self-assessment	78
6.3.2. External assessment and site visit	79
6.3.3. Report	79
6.3.4. Follow-up	80
Reflections	80
Supporting documents.....	81
6.4. ESG Standard 2.4 Peer-review experts	82
6.4.1. Selection of assessors	82
6.4.2. Training of external assessors	83
6.4.3. Objectivity of assessors	83
Reflections	84
Supporting documents.....	85
6.5. ESG Standard 2.5 Criteria for outcomes.....	85
6.5.1. Pre-defined and published assessment criteria - basis for determining outcomes.....	85
6.5.2. Support to assessment panels to ensure consistent and transparent assessments.....	88

Reflections.....	88
Supporting documents.....	89
6.6. ESG Standard 2.6 Reporting.....	90
Reflections.....	91
Supporting documents.....	91
6.7. ESG Standard 2.7 Complaints and appeals.....	92
6.7.1. Appeals.....	93
6.7.2. Complaints.....	94
Reflections.....	95
Supporting documents.....	95
7. Opinions of stakeholders.....	96
7.1. Stakeholder survey 2024.....	96
7.2. Reference groups and dialogue.....	97
Reflections.....	97
Supporting documents.....	98
8. Recommendations and main findings from the previous review and UKÄ's resulting follow-up.....	99
ENQA's recommendations.....	99
ESG 3.3 Independence.....	99
ESG 2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose.....	100
ESG 2.3 Implementing processes.....	101
ESG 2.7 Complaints and appeals.....	102
9. SWOT analysis.....	103
10. Key challenges and areas for future development.....	106
Implementation and follow-up of the revised national quality assurance framework.....	106
Impact and added value of UKÄ's reviews and analyses.....	107
Internationalisation.....	108
Abbreviations.....	111
Annex 1 ESG Part 2 alignment.....	113
Annex 2 List of Supporting documents.....	114

Preface

This self-assessment report for the Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ) demonstrates that UKÄ conducts external quality assurance activities in compliance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (2015), the ESG. It has been developed in line with the guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews.

Since the previous ENQA review, UKÄ has conducted extensive development work, responding to the recommendations from the previous expert panel, other external and internal evaluations, and continuous feedback from the HEIs. The national framework for quality assurance has been thoroughly revised, in dialogue with HEIs and other stakeholders, and we are confident that processes, procedures, and assessment criteria are now better designed to make UKÄ's reviews and evaluations more flexible, accurate, and resource-efficient, while recognising the HEIs' autonomy and responsibility for the quality assurance of their teaching, learning, and research.

At agency level, UKÄ strives to coordinate better its operations in quality assurance, legal supervision, statistics, and analysis, which all promote quality in higher education and research, though only quality assurance is in the scope of the ESG. Since the last review, notable achievements have been made in this regard, in line with UKÄ's goals to be the acknowledged source of information about higher education and research in Sweden, and to create results that are beneficial for the development of the sector.

The present ENQA review occurs at a time when we believe this will be of particular benefit to the agency, and we look forward to the feedback from the panel.

The self-assessment report is the product of the committed involvement of UKÄ staff and stakeholders, and the self-evaluation process as such has already contributed to our organisational learning and development. This shows the importance of periodical external assessment.

UKÄ hereby commends its self-assessment report to the ENQA Board and the review panel. Based on the outcome of this assessment, UKÄ will seek renewed membership of ENQA and registration on EQAR.

Martin Norsell
Director General

Rikard Lingström
Head of the Department of
Quality Assurance

1. Introduction

The Swedish Higher Education Authority's (UKÄ)¹ self-assessment report is divided into 10 chapters, and follows the structure outlined in the Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews.

Chapter 2 describes the development of UKÄ's self-assessment report, and the internal process initiated to prepare the agency for the application for renewed ENQA membership and registration on EQAR.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of higher education in Sweden, and of the evaluation and quality assurance of higher education.

Chapter 4 describes the history, profile, and activities of UKÄ, including external quality assurance, legal supervision and inspection, as well as analysis and statistics.

Chapters 5-6 evaluate UKÄ's compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ESG) Part 3 and Part 2.

Chapters 7-10 provide information on UKÄ's stakeholders and their opinions, the agency's SWOT analysis, and UKÄ's current challenges and areas for future development.

A list of abbreviations is found after the last chapter.

Annex 1 shows the alignment of key principles of UKÄ's external quality assurance processes with the ESG Part 2.

Annex 2 lists the supporting documents referred to throughout the report.

¹ In Swedish: *Universitetskanslersämbetet*.

2. Development of the self-assessment report

The development of UKÄ's self-assessment report (SAR) and related activities have been organised according to the agency's regular project model.

When the Director General had decided that UKÄ should undergo an ENQA agency review and made a formal request to ENQA and EQAR in May 2024, an internal project was set up. The head of the Department of Quality Assurance was assigned project ownership, and a project manager was appointed together with a core project team of three staff members. A project plan was developed for the review process, and the project team started planning and conducting activities to involve colleagues at all levels and departments in different parts of the process. Once the Terms of Reference between ENQA, EQAR and UKÄ were agreed upon in November 2024, the team began drafting the SAR. The project manager had continuous meetings with the project owner, and checks with the Director General as well as UKÄ's management team.

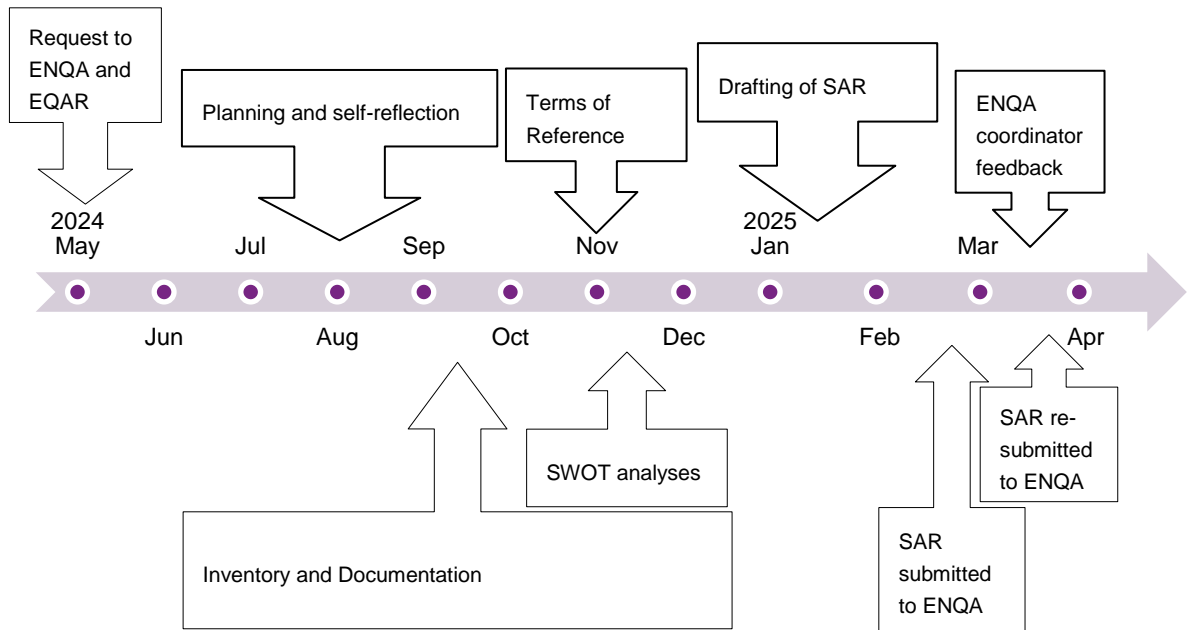
A project reference network with representatives from all departments supported the project team with expertise and documentation, and served as an informal sounding board providing feedback to the project team.

General information on the purpose and process of the application for renewed ENQA membership and registration on EQAR and on the SAR process was communicated to all UKÄ staff at staff meetings as well as department meetings. For stakeholders, a brief background, with relevant links and information about the application process, including a timeline, was made available on the agency's website, in newsletters, and presented at various meetings, in particular meetings with UKÄ's reference groups (4.3).

The Department of Quality Assurance participated in mini-workshops such as SWOT-analyses focusing on the agency's performance in activities relevant to the external review. Similar activities were also conducted with the agency's stakeholder reference groups, UKÄ's Advisory Council (4.3), and the management team. Results were sorted thematically and summarised in the SWOT-analysis presented in chapter 9. The project team also hosted workshops for staff at the Department of Quality Assurance, in which participants reflected on questions like 'How do our assessment criteria map against the ESG?', and gave examples of good practice and identified areas of improvement.

During the drafting process, two members of UKÄ’s International Advisory Committee (4.3) were invited to review the draft self-assessment report, and gave valuable suggestions for improvement of structure and clarification of content. The Director General, the management team, the head of the Department of Quality Assurance, heads of groups, and senior project managers who had not been part of the project team commented on the draft report as it developed.

The SAR process can be illustrated by the following timeline:



3. Higher education and QA of higher education in Sweden

The chapter provides an overview of the Swedish higher education system, including higher education providers, governance, and an introduction to quality assurance and evaluation of higher education.

3.1. Higher Education in Sweden

Higher education in Sweden refers to post-secondary education that is regulated by higher education legislation. Higher education is defined by its placement in the education system (post-secondary) and by the requirement that the education be based on scholarship or artistic practice and on proven experience. Higher education is the largest form of tertiary education in Sweden in terms of volume. There is also higher vocational education. Higher vocational education and higher education are separate systems. Since higher vocational education is outside the scope of the current evaluation, this chapter will focus on higher education.

The Swedish higher education system is relatively flexible since all first- and second-cycle education is based on courses. Courses may be combined by the higher education institutions (HEIs) to form programmes that lead to the award of a specific qualification. In addition, most HEIs offer freestanding courses² where students may select their own combination of courses leading to the award of a qualification of choice as long as the requirements in the Higher Education Ordinance are met.

HEIs may offer campus based or distance education, some of which can be completely online.

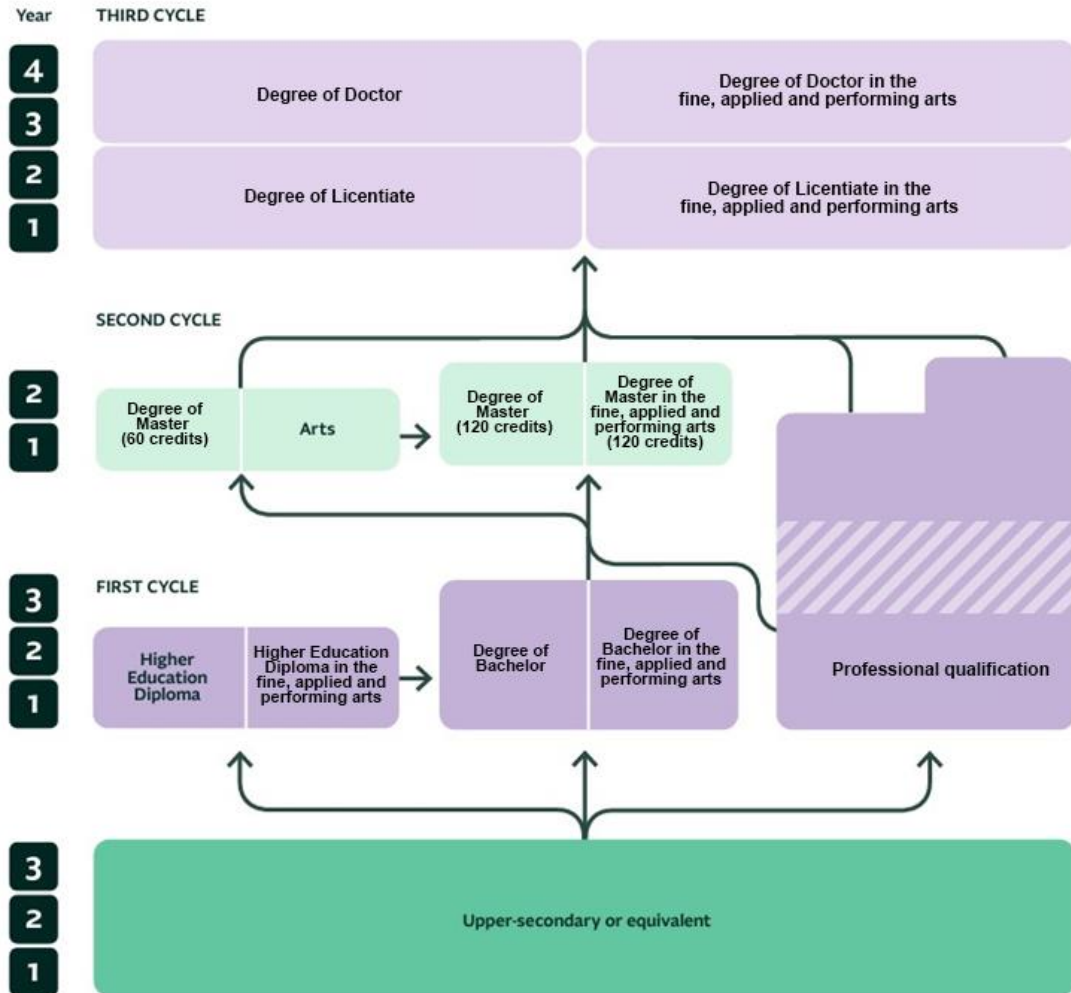
All courses, programmes and qualifications are placed in one of three cycles: first, second or third. There is progression between the cycles, in that each cycle is based on the one before. The formal requirements that distinguish these cycles are specified in the Higher Education Act (1992:1434).³ Swedish higher education's division into cycles is a result of the adaption to the Bologna Process. Swedish higher education

² Freestanding courses also correspond to micro-credentials in Swedish higher education.

³ <https://www.uhr.se/en/start/laws-and-regulations/Laws-and-regulations/The-Swedish-Higher-Education-Act/> (in English)

programmes are at levels 6 – 8 of the Swedish qualifications framework (SeQF).⁴

Figure 1. Qualifications framework within the Swedish higher education



The third-cycle level includes, in addition to courses, writing a research thesis or creating a documented artistic research project equivalent to at least half of the programme length.

The scope of higher education is expressed as higher education credits. One academic year is typically two semesters and normally 40 weeks, which corresponds to 60 higher education credits of full-time study. Higher education credits in the Swedish educational system correspond to the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System credits (ECTS

⁴ <https://www.uhr.se/en/start/recognition-of-foreign-qualifications/enic-naric-sweden/qualification-frameworks-for-swedish-qualifications-and-degrees/> (in English)

credits), in which 60 credits are the equivalent of one year of full-time study.

By tradition, Swedish higher education has not been limited to educating youth after completing upper-secondary education. It also includes continuing professional development, and individuals taking courses for personal development. Thus, higher education in Sweden has a clear role in lifelong learning, which is also expressed in the Higher Education Ordinance (1993:100)⁵ as a mission for the HEIs.

The total number of students (headcounts) in first and second cycle in the academic year of 2022/23 was 383,500. This is an increase compared with the previous academic year and a small decrease compared to the pandemic years 2020 – 2021, which saw the largest student population ever. The share of women enrolled in higher education was approximately 60 per cent and men 40 per cent.

The total number of students graduating from first and second cycle in the academic year of 2022/23 was approximately 72,500. This is a decrease compared with the previous academic year. The number of graduates decreased two academic years in a row. However, over the past three decades the number of graduates has increased significantly, from just over 30,000 per year in the early 1990s, to over 70,000 in recent academic years.

The equivalent numbers for third-cycle education were approximately 17,500 doctoral students enrolled in doctoral education at Swedish HEIs in the autumn of 2023. Over the past ten-year period, the number of doctoral students peaked in autumn 2013, when approximately 19,500 were studying at a doctoral programme. In 2023, the proportion of women was 53 per cent and the proportion of men 47 per cent.

In doctoral education in Sweden, there are two degrees with different scope: the doctoral degree and the licentiate degree. The doctoral degree is the highest academic degree and covers four years of full-time study, while the licentiate degree covers two years of full-time study (the licentiate degree can also be awarded as a first part of a doctoral degree).

In 2023, approximately 2,750 doctoral degrees were awarded. This was a small increase since the previous year. Over the past decade, the number of doctoral degrees awarded has fluctuated, but in the last three years, the number has increased. In particular, more women have obtained a doctor's degree in the last three years. Over the past decade, the number of licentiate degrees has almost halved. In 2023, just over 400 licentiate degrees were awarded, compared with almost 800 in 2013.

⁵ <https://www.uhr.se/en/start/laws-and-regulations/Laws-and-regulations/The-Higher-Education-Ordinance/> (in English)

3.1.1. Qualifications

Swedish higher education may lead to either of three categories of qualifications which all have the same academic status:

- general qualifications
- qualifications in the fine, applied and performing arts
- professional qualifications.

Both general qualifications and qualifications in the fine, applied and performing arts are awarded within the first, second or third cycles. Professional qualifications are awarded within the first and second cycles and mainly in the regulated professions.

When the student has fulfilled the requirements for a qualification, he or she must apply for a degree certificate. This is not issued automatically by the HEI. Annex 2 of the Higher Education Ordinance contains the national System of Qualifications, which includes descriptions of scope and learning outcomes (qualitative targets) for all degrees.

3.1.2. Admission to Higher Education

Sweden has a uniform system of admission to higher education. National admission regulations are defined in the Higher Education Act and the Higher Education Ordinance, and in regulations issued by the Swedish Council for Higher Education (UHR).⁶ The vast majority of admissions is pooled. UHR is responsible for pooled admissions on behalf of the HEIs, but the individual HEI makes the official decision to admit the student.

Detailed national regulations apply mainly to the admission of higher education entrants to first-cycle education. There are also regulations on admission to second- and third-cycle education, but these are less comprehensive.

Fulfilment of the entry requirements does not guarantee admission to higher education. If there are more applicants than can be admitted, selection criteria are used. All first-cycle courses and programmes, apart from those that lead to the award of qualifications in the fine, applied and performing arts, use more or less the same criteria. These are based mainly on final upper-secondary school grades or results from the Swedish Scholastic Aptitude Test. The Higher Education Ordinance lists what selection criteria, beyond these, may be invoked. The Ordinance

⁶ <https://www.uhr.se/en/start/laws-and-regulations/Laws-and-regulations/>

also contains regulations on the evaluation of final school grades, including those from foreign countries and older Swedish grade systems.

3.1.3. Admission to Third-Cycle Education

Application to third-cycle education is made directly to the HEI. HEIs are individually responsible for admitting students, and admit them directly. HEIs may only admit students with funding and are obliged to provide all admitted students with supervision and acceptable study conditions. To be admitted to third-cycle education, the applicant must have obtained a second-cycle degree or second-cycle credits, or have equivalent knowledge, and must also fulfil the specific entry requirements.

3.2. Higher Education Providers in Sweden

In Sweden, higher education is provided by universities, university colleges, or by independent higher education providers. The primary difference between a university and a university college is that universities enjoy general entitlement to award degrees at the master and doctoral levels, while university colleges must apply for permission to award master (120 credits) and third-cycle degrees in specific areas. Independent higher education providers have to apply separately for each qualification they wish to award. All public and independent higher education providers must apply for entitlement to award professional qualifications and qualifications in the fine, applied and performing arts.

In Sweden, accreditation of higher education takes the form of granting degree-awarding powers. Public HEIs apply to UKÄ for degree-awarding powers. UKÄ assesses these applications and decides independently whether to approve them; for further information on this process, see 6.2.3. Independent education providers apply to the Government for degree-awarding powers. The Government normally sends the application to UKÄ for appraisal (no cases where the Government did not consult UKÄ are known to the agency). Degree-awarding powers are granted indefinitely, unless there are grounds for revoking them. One such ground is failure to meet quality standards in a programme evaluation conducted by UKÄ.

The vast majority of higher education is provided by public HEIs. The Swedish Parliament establishes public HEIs as government agencies, which answer directly to the Government. Within the Government, the Ministry of Education and Research is responsible for most matters relating to the HEIs, higher education and research. The Government determines what national qualifications may be offered and the requirements for them in the form of scope and objectives which are expressed in the Higher Education Ordinance.

Even if the majority of HEIs are governmental agencies, ministerial interference is strictly prohibited by law. This means that HEIs are autonomous in matters involving, among other things, decisions about organisation, internal allocation of resources, content and design of courses and programmes, the number of students admitted, and what research they conduct. In addition, the freedom of research is laid down in the Swedish constitution (The Instrument of Government, 1974:152, Chapter 2, Article 18).⁷

There are also independent (non-state) higher education providers, of which the majority are small and only offer programmes in one or two subject areas. Of 49 HEIs in Sweden (year 2023), 31 are public HEIs. The list includes 18 universities (16 of which are public HEIs), 12 university colleges (11 of which are public HEIs), and 5 art academies (4 of which are public HEIs). The remaining 14 are independent education providers.⁸

According to the Higher Education Act (1992:1434),⁹ HEIs' two primary missions are to provide higher education based on scholarship or artistic practice and on proven experience, and to perform research and artistic research as well as development work. They shall also collaborate for mutual exchanges with the surrounding community, as well as ensure that the knowledge and expertise created at the HEI bring benefit to society.

3.3. Governance of Higher Education in Sweden

Sweden has a uniform system for higher education, and the same legislation applies to all higher education, regardless of provider. The overall responsibility for education and research rests with the Swedish Parliament and the Government, which decide on the regulations that apply to the higher education sector, primarily via the Higher Education Act¹⁰ and the Higher Education Ordinance¹¹.

The Higher Education Act is enacted by the Swedish Parliament and regulates the HEIs' operations. The Act contains basic regulations for education offered by HEIs. For instance, it sets out what should characterise courses and programmes at different levels and stipulates academic freedom and freedom of research. It provides a framework for the organisation and governance of the HEIs, and it states that every HEI should have a board of governors and a vice-chancellor. The Act also

⁷ <https://www.riksdagen.se/globalassets/05.-sa-fungerar-riksdagen/demokrati/the-instrument-of-government-2023-eng.pdf> (in English)

⁸ <https://www.uka.se/swedish-higher-education-authority/about-higher-education/universities-university-colleges-and-other-education-providers/higher-education-institutions> (in English)

⁹ <https://www.uhr.se/en/start/laws-and-regulations/Laws-and-regulations/The-Swedish-Higher-Education-Act/> (in English)

¹⁰ <https://www.uhr.se/en/start/laws-and-regulations/Laws-and-regulations/The-Swedish-Higher-Education-Act/> (in English)

¹¹ <https://www.uhr.se/en/start/laws-and-regulations/Laws-and-regulations/The-Higher-Education-Ordinance/> (in English)

contains regulations for the duties of teachers and provisions about student influence. In addition, the Act specifies that HEIs must promote equality of opportunity, widened recruitment and lifelong learning. The Act also specifies that the collective international activities of each HEI should both enhance the quality of its research and education, and contribute to sustainable development.

The Higher Education Act is supplemented by the Higher Education Ordinance, the Ordinance (1993:221) for the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences,¹² and the Ordinance (2007:1164) for the Swedish Defence University,¹³ which are decreed by the Government. The Higher Education Ordinance states that students must be given the opportunity to influence their studies. The Ordinance also contains regulations on entrance qualifications, the selection for courses and programmes and the appointment of teachers and doctoral students. Further, it includes regulations on requirements in course and programme syllabuses, on grades and on qualifications. The Government determines what qualifications may be offered and requirements for qualifications in the form of scope and learning outcomes (qualitative targets).¹⁴

HEIs are also governed by the Government's annual public service agreements with each HEI. The public service agreement specifies requirements as educational offerings having to correspond to demand from students and the needs of the labour market, as well as the size of the state funding for first- and second-cycle education and for research and third-cycle education. The public service agreement can also include specific assignments given to HEIs.

Since the public HEIs are public authorities, they are also governed by other regulations, such as the Administrative Procedure Act, the Annual Reports and Budget Documentation Ordinance, and the Environmental Management Ordinance. Naturally, the Discrimination Act also applies to HEIs.

The operations of independent higher education providers are regulated through a specific law, the Act Concerning Authority to Award Certain Qualifications (1993:792).¹⁵ The Act provides regulations that independent higher education providers are required to be allowed to award specific degrees. It also includes provisions that independent HEIs must follow requirements of the Higher Education Act and that they are obliged to participate in external follow-ups and evaluations of their programmes. Independent HEIs must therefore align to the same national regulations for quality assurance as public HEIs. Independent higher

¹² <https://www.uhr.se/en/start/laws-and-regulations/Laws-and-regulations/Ordinance-for-the-Swedish-University-of-Agricultural-Sciences/> (in English)

¹³ <https://www.uhr.se/en/start/laws-and-regulations/Laws-and-regulations/Ordinance-for-the-Swedish-National-Defence-college/> (in English)

¹⁴ Higher Education Ordinance, Annex 2.

¹⁵ <https://www.uhr.se/en/start/laws-and-regulations/Laws-and-regulations/Act-Concerning-Authority-to-Award-Certain-Qualifications/> (in English)

education providers are also often governed by contracts with the Government laying out requirements for the independent education providers.

3.4. Quality Assurance and Evaluation of Higher Education in Sweden

In accordance with the Higher Education Act, all HEIs in Sweden are responsible for ensuring that their education and research are of high quality. The resources available shall be used effectively to sustain a high standard of operation and HEIs' internal quality assurance procedures are a shared concern of staff and students at HEIs. UKÄ's role is to ensure that the HEIs fulfil their responsibility for quality.

In its role as national quality assurance agency, UKÄ is responsible for the external quality assurance of both public and independent higher education providers. Both public HEIs and independent higher education providers are required to participate in UKÄ's external quality assurance activities as stated in the Higher Education Ordinance.

The external quality assurance activities within the scope of this review are based on the Higher Education Act, the Higher Education Ordinance, Ordinance (2012:810) with instructions for the Swedish Higher Education Authority, and the ESG. The activities focus on both accountability and on providing support for the enhancement of HEIs' internal quality assurance procedures, as most quality assurance activities are to be conducted by the HEIs.

In addition to these external quality assurance activities, UKÄ also conducts quality assurance activities outside the scope of the ESG, such as the institutional review of research. These reviews are conducted at the same time and assessed by the same assessment panel as the institutional review of higher education (5.1.1). The Department of Higher Education Analysis is responsible for producing background information about the HEI undergoing review. This is not considered an assessment material per se, but may be used by the assessors as a starting point for questions during the site visit or as a basis for choosing audit trails.

The national framework for quality assurance of higher education and research, its development since the previous ENQA review, and UKÄ's other operations are described further in chapters 4 – 6.

4. History, profile and activities of UKÄ

This chapter describes the history and profile of UKÄ, and gives a summary of the agency's activities with an overview of UKÄ's quality assurance activities and international activities.

4.1. The Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ)

UKÄ is the official national agency responsible for the external assurance of the quality, regulation, and continuous improvement of higher education in Sweden. UKÄ was established in January 2013 when three agencies (the National Agency for Higher Education Services; the National Agency for Higher Education, and the International Programme Office) were merged into two new agencies: UKÄ and the Swedish Council for Higher Education (UHR).

UKÄ is an independent government agency under the Ministry of Education and Research. UKÄ's operations are laid down in the instructions issued by the Government.¹⁶ These instructions define its areas of responsibility and the tasks to be undertaken.

4.1.1. Three main areas of operation

UKÄ's various quality assurance activities form a national framework for quality in higher education and research, with the purpose of benefitting both students and HEIs. Whereas all the agency's operations support quality aspects of both higher education and research, only its external quality assurance of higher education is within the scope of the ESG. According to the agency's instructions, its three main areas of operation are:

- Quality assurance of higher education and research, and appraisal of the degree-awarding powers of public HEIs
- Legal supervision of higher education
- Monitoring efficiency, follow-up and horizon scanning, as well as responsibility for statistics in the higher education sector.

¹⁶ Ordinance (2012:810) with instructions for the Swedish Higher Education Authority. <https://rkrattsbaser.gov.se/sfst?bet=2012:810> (in Swedish). A non-official English translation is available.

In addition to this, UKÄ hosts The Higher Education Appeals Board and The Higher Education Expulsions Board (4.3), which means that UKÄ provides administrative support to these boards. UKÄ also receives government assignments within the agency's fields of competence in the scope of higher education and research. According to the agency's instructions, UKÄ should also promote managerial development in HEIs, an example of which is UKÄ's annual management development activity offered to the vice-chancellors of all HEIs.

The national framework for quality assurance of higher education and research

UKÄ assesses and monitors the quality of higher education and research in Sweden. The agency conducts audits, assessments, and reviews of universities and university colleges to ensure that educational programmes meet national standards, and that HEIs have robust processes for the quality assurance of their education and research. UKÄ is also responsible for assessing programmes and institutions wishing to offer higher education in Sweden.

UKÄ's tasks relating to the ESG are largely covered by the Department of Quality Assurance. The department is organised into three groups. One group focuses, among other things, on international quality assurance issues. The other two groups work with the national framework for external quality assurance, consisting of four separate but interlinked activities:

- institutional reviews of the HEIs' quality assurance processes,
- programme evaluations,
- appraisal of applications for degree-awarding powers
- thematic evaluations.

The objectives of the external quality assurance activities are to assess the quality of outcomes of study programmes and contribute to HEIs' work with quality enhancement in higher education and research. Reviews and evaluations are developed in dialogue with representatives from HEIs, students, and the labour market.

The external quality assurance activities, the methodology and implementation of each external quality assurance activity and compliance with the ESG Part 2 are further described in 5.1, 6.2, and 6.3, respectively.

Student rights and legal supervision of higher education

UKÄ is a regulatory agency, which means that UKÄ reviews the compliance of HEIs with the applicable rules and regulations in Sweden, with a focus on students' rights. It applies, among other things, to the provisions of the Higher Education Act, the Higher Education Ordinance

and the Administrative Procedure Act. UKÄ also reviews whether HEIs comply with their own rules.

Supervision can be initiated on behalf of the Government, on UKÄ's initiative, or following a complaint from an individual or an organisation. The supervision is conducted according to different methods: complaints processing, primarily from students; supervision of HEIs; inspections when warranted, and projects investigating special issues.

Statistics, follow-up and analysis

UKÄ is responsible for the official statistics within higher education. UKÄ therefore compiles and publishes data about Swedish higher education, including information on student numbers, performance, and trends in academic achievement. UKÄ ensures that the data is objective, documented and accompanied by a quality declaration. The statistics are used to provide the Swedish Parliament and Government with material on which to base decisions about higher education, thus forming a basis for informed policy and improved educational standards. UKÄ publishes an annual report containing the statistics of the preceding year, long-term trends, and an international comparison. The aim of the statistics produced by UKÄ is to give the agency, as well as the HEIs, a better understanding of the higher education sector.

Statistics are also used as background information about HEIs that are in the process of undergoing institutional reviews or programme evaluations. The statistics give a picture of the HEI's profile and efficiency, and assist the assessors in understanding the review object, but are not to be considered as information to assess. The data collected is also used to analyse different themes in higher education, such as the efficiency of HEIs. The Government's objective is that HEIs should maintain high international standards and be run efficiently. UKÄ monitors relevant operations, such as how resources are used, by developing methods fit for purpose.

4.2. International activities

UKÄ does not conduct cross-border quality assurance activities, but the agency considers international collaboration a crucial part of its operations. The increased internationalisation of higher education places new demands on quality assurance. In order to develop methods and processes to participate in the increasing internationalisation, UKÄ collaborates with quality assurance organisations in other countries through international knowledge exchanges, working groups, meetings, courses, and conferences. In addition, both UKÄ and Swedish HEIs closely follow and participate in international developments, particularly within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

Swedish HEIs have responded to EHEA's call for increased internationalisation and many are involved in joint programmes within the European Universities initiative. Transnational programmes are therefore expected to grow in numbers. In 2024, UKÄ, together with the Swedish Council for Higher Education, conducted a survey to map Swedish HEIs' experiences of transnational quality assurance of European Universities alliances and joint programmes. The report revealed, among other things, several obstacles to the establishment of joint programmes. In the report, UKÄ recommends the Government to examine the regulations that aggravate the establishment and quality assurance of joint programmes. The report also concludes that UKÄ, as well as Swedish HEIs, need to develop their knowledge and understanding of transnational quality assurance.¹⁷

UKÄ is currently exploring how to implement Sweden's commitment to the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes within the national framework for quality assurance. For instance, several project managers of the Department of Quality Assurance have completed the training course developed by the European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA) on the European Approach. In October 2024, UKÄ hosted the ECA training. The European degree is also on the political agenda and UKÄ closely follows the unfolding developments, such as the European degree policy lab.

Since 2022, UKÄ is one of five Swedish government agencies assigned to develop and implement the Platform for Internationalisation (Plint), where one working area is responsible internationalisation. The purpose of Plint is to support HEIs to increase their internationalisation. The five agencies coordinate knowledge and topics regarding internationalisation in close dialogue with HEIs, authorities and other interested parties.

In 2023, UKÄ became a member of CoARA (Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment). That same year, internationalisation was a focus area for UKÄ with reinforced horizon scanning and collaboration with external partners, and UKÄ arranged a staff exchange with six other European quality assurance organisations.

In March 2021, UKÄ also joined EQAR (European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education). The longstanding collaborations within the Nordic Network of Quality Assurance (NOQA),¹⁸ the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), and the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA) have continued. NOQA is a network of quality assurance agencies in Denmark, Finland, Norway, Iceland, and Sweden, which organises annual meetings on recent developments of quality assurance activities nationally and

¹⁷ [Transnational Quality Assurance. Swedish higher education institutions' experiences of quality assurance of European Universities alliances and joint programmes. UKÄ 2024 \(in English\)](#)

¹⁸ <https://www.nokut.no/en/about-nokut/international-cooperation/noqa/> (in English)

internationally. Every second year, the Baltic states are invited to participate. Within NOQA, Nordic quality assurance agencies have worked together on several projects since the early 1990s. The projects have been significant in terms of learning from each other and enhancing co-operation between the organisations. Representatives of UKÄ regularly attend meetings organised within the ENQA cooperation, and several staff members have participated in ENQA's Leadership Development Programme. One staff member of UKÄ sits on the ENQA Agency Review Committee and is part of ENQA's pool of review panel experts, and another staff member is on the board of ECA. UKÄ is also a member of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), and the Quality Audit Network (QAN).

In order to follow the latest developments of other quality assurance agencies closely, UKÄ has strengthened its international cooperation and now participates in various networks and working groups, such as the Bologna Follow-Up Group Thematic Peer Groups C and D, and the ENQA Working Group on Quality Assurance of Research, the latter a result of an initiative of Hcéres and UKÄ for collaboration among ENQA members engaged in the quality assurance of research. The two agencies were granted by ENQA to start a working group with the overall aim to take stock of the assessment of research-based learning, HEIs' research policy, and quality assurance processes of research. The working group consists of 16 quality assurance agencies from 15 countries and runs for 18 months.

International activities in higher education statistics

As responsible for official national statistics on higher education, UKÄ participates through its Department of Higher Education Analysis in a number of international organisations and networks:

- Eurostat: Education and Training Statistics Working Group on Education and adult learning statistics
- UNESCO/UIS, OECD, and Eurostat data collection (UOE joint data collection)
- The Advisory Board of the European Tertiary Education Register (ETER), under the European Commission's Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture
- OECD: Indicators of Education Systems (INES) programme, including INES Working Party, Network on Data Collection and Development on Labour Market, Economic, and Social Outcomes of Education (LSO), and Network for the Collection and Adjudication of System-Level Descriptive Information on Educational Structures, Policies and Practices (NESLI). The Group of National Experts on Higher Education, a sub-committee to the Education Policy Committee.

UKÄ also participates in two informal working groups within OECD: Classification of programme orientation at tertiary level and Institutional-level Data at Tertiary Level.

4.3. Organisation

The Director General is the highest executive officer at UKÄ. The Director General acts on behalf of the agency, holds the final responsibility for the agency’s activities, and reports directly to the Government. In case of absence or conflict of interest, the Deputy Director General steps in. The management team is chaired by the Director General and includes the heads of the agency’s departments.

UKÄ is divided into four departments, some of which are subdivided into groups that focus on specific areas of the department’s mandate. The chart in figure 2 illustrates UKÄ’s internal organisation. See 5.5.2 for numbers of staff in the different departments.

Figure 2. UKÄ’s internal organisation



The Department of Legal Affairs supervises HEIs by monitoring and reviewing how they apply laws and regulations. It provides legal advice to other departments and act as the secretariat of the Higher Education Appeals Board (ÖNH), which hears appeals against certain decisions taken in the higher education sector and the qualified vocational training sector. The department is also the secretariat for the Higher Education Expulsions Board (HAN). HAN hears cases of suspension/expulsion of students from higher education programmes following notification from the vice-chancellor of a university or university college.

The Department of Higher Education Analysis monitors the activities of Swedish HEIs and is responsible for official statistics in the higher education sector. It also monitors the efficiency of higher education and conducts external analyses and horizon scanning.

The Department of Quality Assurance reviews the quality of higher education and HEIs' systems for quality assurance of higher education and research. This department is further described in the following chapters.

The Department for Operational Support handles IT, HR, management support, and communications. The department contributes to the agency's development by identifying needs, solutions and proposing strategic development areas and priorities. The operational and the financial controller are also responsible for the planning and governance processes.

UKÄ collaborates with other governmental bodies, HEIs, and various stakeholders in the Swedish education system. These stakeholders include university representatives, student organisations, policymakers, and international partners. UKÄ also consults external experts and other relevant authorities prior to making decisions related to higher education standards and regulations.

UKÄ's Advisory Council and its members are appointed for a three-year mandate by the Government to advise the Director General on various matters, as per the Ordinance of Government Agencies (2007:515).¹⁹ The council meets four times per year,²⁰ and is composed of representatives of the agency's stakeholders, adding an additional forum for dialogue between the agency and its stakeholders.²¹ Student representatives are selected by the Swedish National Union of Students, while other members of the council are appointed directly by the Government. The Government consults UKÄ on any needs for particular expertise identified by the agency, but UKÄ has no influence on the nomination or appointment process, nor can UKÄ dismiss council members. The Advisory Council helps guide the agency's strategic direction and ensures that the agency's activities align with national educational policy and objectives. The scope, definitions, and methodology of government assignments are sometimes also discussed, for example, a recent assignment to investigate academic freedom (see chapter 10). The aim of the Advisory Council is for UKÄ to meet the requirements of democratic transparency, but the council has no decision-making powers. The council is chaired by UKÄ's Director General.

UKÄ works closely with reference groups assisting in the work with the quality assurance framework and, when relevant, other activities of the agency. There are three reference groups for the national quality assurance framework with representatives from three different areas:

¹⁹ <https://rkrattsbaser.gov.se/sfst?bet=2007:515> (in Swedish)

²⁰ The protocols of the Advisory Council meetings are published on UKÄ's website, <https://www.uka.se/om-oss/det-har-ar-universitetskanslersambetet/insynsrad> (in Swedish).

²¹ For the purpose and current composition of the Advisory Council, see <https://www.uka.se/swedish-higher-education-authority/about-us/advisory-council> in English)

- representatives of HEIs, students, doctoral students and SULF (the union for teachers and researchers in the higher education sector)
- representatives of employer and employee organisations
- international experts in the field of quality assurance (UKÄ's International Advisory Committee).

The groups assist UKÄ in the work to ensure quality in higher education, and they contribute to UKÄ's internal quality assurance, but have no decision-making powers.

4.4. Historical overview of quality assurance activities

Consistent quality assurance of higher education in Sweden has a history of nearly 30 years. Hence, UKÄ and its predecessors have gathered extensive experience in the field of external quality assurance. Different methods have been developed and used, and over time the focus of the national framework has shifted between control and improvement, quality assessment and quality enhancement.

In the mid-nineties, there was a strong focus on internal quality assurance processes at HEIs. In 1995, the National Agency for Higher Education inherited from the Office of the University Chancellor the implementation and further development of the two six-year cycles of institutional quality audits (institutional reviews), as well as appraisal of applications for degree-awarding powers. A number of programme evaluations were also carried out, generally based on indications of problems or poor quality. This approach proved insufficient as the sole means of assessing the quality of study programmes.

From 2001 onwards, programme and subject evaluations became the predominant form of quality assurance. At the same time, the quality audits were temporarily phased out. As the first cycle conducted between 2001 and 2007 drew to a close, plans were developed for a revised quality assurance framework, including institutional reviews, evaluations of courses and study programmes, appraisal of applications for degree-awarding powers, and thematic evaluations and thematic studies. This framework for external quality assurance was in operation until 2010. The model had met with some criticism, not least from the Association of Swedish Higher Education Institutions (SUHF), who claimed that it lacked transparency, predictability and comparability, and that its focus on results was too weak.

After a prolonged period of discussions and deliberations, a new national framework for evaluation of courses and programmes was designed for the period 2011 – 2014.²² In 2013, UKÄ began developing the current

²² Follow-ups were conducted until 2016.

national framework for external quality assurance. Key to the whole development process was close dialogue with stakeholders, and UKÄ conducted conferences, interviews, surveys, and seminars with representatives from HEIs, teachers, students, employers and the labour market aimed at collecting opinions and development ideas. A Government communication,²³ together with experience from the 2011 – 2014 review cycle and the comments and suggestions that were collected during the work initiated in 2013, formed the basis for further developing the model for UKÄ’s external quality assurance activities.

The following quality assurance cycle ran between 2017 and 2022. During this cycle, 42 HEIs underwent review of their quality assurance processes for education, and some also for research since this responsibility was tasked UKÄ in 2017. Apart from this, a total of 225 first-cycle and second-cycle vocational programmes and 153 third-cycle programmes were evaluated, 85 applications for degree-awarding powers were processed, and three thematic evaluations were conducted. External evaluations²⁴ and internal follow-ups showed that UKÄ’s reviews during this cycle were quality enhancing, but also resource-intensive. UKÄ began methodological revision work in 2021 with the aim of making reviews more accurate and flexible, and less onerous for HEIs, assessors and UKÄ. The adjustments of methodologies made to the four components are described more in detail in 6.2.

²³ Government communication (*Kvalitetssäkring av högre utbildning 2015/16:76*), report from the Education Committee and the Riksdag communication (report 2015/16:UbU9, Riksdag communication 2015/16:155) (in Swedish)

²⁴ ENQA Agency Review 2020, and *Evaluation of the national system for quality assurance of higher education and training, an analysis of the current cycle 2017 – 2022*, Faugert/Technopolis Group 2020 (A non-official English translation is available)

5. Profile, functioning and (EQA) activities of UKÄ (compliance with Part 3 of the ESG)

This chapter addresses UKÄ's compliance with each standard of Part 3 of the ESG individually for each external quality assurance activity of the national quality assurance framework. Compliance with the ESG Part 2 is addressed in chapter 6.

5.1. ESG 3.1 Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance

Standard

Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities as defined in Part 2 of the ESG on a regular basis. They should have clear and explicit goals and objectives that are part of their publicly available mission statement. These should translate into the daily work of the agency. Agencies should ensure the involvement of stakeholders in their governance and work.

The national framework for quality assurance of higher education and research consists of four external quality assurance activities. The objectives of the activities are partly to assess the performance of study programmes, partly to contribute to HEIs' quality enhancement work in education and research.

The current framework integrates all types of quality assessment that UKÄ undertakes with an emphasis on providing support for the HEIs in their own internal quality assurance and enhancement. This is a cornerstone of the national framework, as most quality assurance activities are to be conducted by the HEIs.

Each activity within the national quality assurance framework is carried out regularly, according to its own timetable, and processes are described, for example, in guidelines communicated to the HEIs and on the UKÄ website.

The purpose of UKÄ's institutional review of HEIs' internal quality assurance processes is both to verify that HEIs achieve high quality in

their activities, and to contribute to HEIs' quality development. The review focuses on whether the HEIs' quality assurance processes contribute to ensuring and developing the quality of education and research in a systematic and fit-for-purpose manner. The HEI must be able to demonstrate that it organises, applies, and follows up its internal quality assurance processes in an effective manner, and changes what does not work effectively. Institutional reviews address most of the ESG in Part 1 (6.1, table 6).

The purpose of UKÄ's programme evaluations is both to check the results of programmes and contribute to enhancing the quality of the HEI's courses and programmes. Evaluations examine the quality of programmes, with emphasis on how the programme is designed and implemented for the student to achieve the qualitative targets to be awarded the degree. Programme evaluations mainly address ESG 1.2, 1.5, and 1.6 (6.1, table 6).

The purpose of the appraisal of applications for degree-awarding powers is to examine whether an HEI meets the necessary prerequisites for students or doctoral students to achieve the goals and qualitative targets for the degree of the educational programme. An appraisal of applications for degree awarding powers mainly addresses ESG 1.2, 1.3, 1.5, and 1.6 (6.1, table 6).

The purpose of the thematic evaluations is to enable national comparisons of how HEIs work, and to provide knowledge about significant achievements within the thematic area. The thematic evaluations are based on tasks that the HEIs are responsible for under national legislation and which are deemed essential for the quality of higher education. Which ESG are addressed by a thematic evaluation differ between evaluations and depend on the specific theme (6.1, table 6).

UKÄ's vision and overarching goals are stated in the publicly available quality policy.²⁵ The vision and goals are translated into operational plans at different levels and are supported by rules of procedures and managing directions (5.6). The goals and different objectives of the external quality assurance activities are described in various documents such as guidelines and manuals available on UKÄ's website (guidelines are normally also translated into English).

As described in chapter 4, UKÄ also performs several tasks and activities that are not within the scope of the ESG. However, the results of such activities provide support for the external quality assurance both internally and externally. Internally, UKÄ's broad competence benefits and supports the fulfilment of the agency's goals and vision. Externally, UKÄ's tasks and activities support the enhancement of quality in higher

²⁵ <https://www.uka.se/swedish-higher-education-authority/about-us/our-management-system/quality-policy> (In English)

education and research, and in HEIs' internal quality assurance processes. Thus, through providing statistics, analysis, and information about the higher education sector, and through support and supervision in legal issues and students' rights, UKÄ's activities outside the scope of the ESG make important contributions to the enhancement of quality in higher education and research. It also contributes to HEIs' trust in UKÄ's operations, and to the public's trust in Swedish higher education, research and innovation, nationally and internationally.

As stated in the quality policy, UKÄ aims to create results that benefit the development of the higher education sector. This is achieved through close cooperation and dialogue with various stakeholders, as well as through stakeholder representation in the agency's governance. At agency level, the Advisory Council (4.3) provides important stakeholder perspectives and guarantees transparency towards the public. In external quality assurance activities, stakeholder involvement is crucial to the development of methodologies and procedures; this is achieved through reference groups (4.3), and through dialogue meetings and hearings with the higher education sector. Assessment panels with students, labour market representatives and experts from HEIs also guarantee continuous stakeholder involvement and feedback.

The ways in which UKÄ involve stakeholders in methodological design are further described in chapter 4 and 6.2, and stakeholder feedback is the topic of chapter 7.

Table 1 shows the total number of completed external quality assurance assessments during 2020 – 2024, including regular reviews, evaluations and appraisals, as well as follow-up assessments.

Table 1. UKÄ's external quality assurance activities 2020 – 2024, in total and divided by outcome.

Year	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Institutional reviews (total)	14	8	8	12	0²⁶
- Approved QA processes	2	4	2	2	0
- Approved QA processes with reservations	11	3	6	10	0
- QA processes under review	1	1	0	0	0
Follow-up of institutional reviews (total)	0	4	8	6	6
- Approved QA processes	0	2	8	6	5
- Approved QA processes with reservations	0	2	0	0	1
- QA processes under review	0	0	0	0	0
Programme evaluations (total)	99	41	36	40	10
- High quality	59	24	32	27	3
- Under review	40	17	4	13	7
Follow-up of programme evaluations (total)	38	40	10	11	16
- High quality	35	36	6	11	11
- Programme cancelled by the HEI	2	2	3	0	5
- Revoked degree-awarding powers	1	2	1	0	0
Appraisal of applications for degree-awarding powers (total)	24	17	18	7	9
- Granted degree-awarding powers	17	6	8	3	6
- Rejected degree-awarding powers	7	11	10	4	3
Thematic evaluations (total)*			1	1	1

*The outcome is in the form of recommendations to each individual HEI.

5.2. ESG Standard 3.2 Official status

Standard

Agencies should have an established legal basis and should be formally recognised as quality assurance agencies by competent public authorities.

As shown in chapter 4, UKÄ has an established legal basis for its operations and is formally recognised as the national quality assurance agency. UKÄ operates independently under the Ministry of Education and Research and receives its funding through allocations from the state budget. UKÄ's activities in general are regulated by the government instructions (4.1) and the annual public service agreement. UKÄ's instructions state that the agency is responsible for conducting quality assurance of HEIs' operations through the four external quality assurance activities described in this report.

Every year UKÄ is to provide an analysis to the Government on how its external quality assurance activities have contributed to quality

²⁶ Preparing for the implementation of the revised methodology (6.2), no new institutional reviews were finalised in 2024.

enhancement and high quality in the operations of HEIs. This is described and exemplified in 5.4.

All public and independent HEIs are required to undergo external quality assurance activities carried out by UKÄ, as stated in the Higher Education Ordinance (3.4). These mandatory activities serve both regulatory and quality enhancement purposes. Decisions made by UKÄ as a result of the external quality assurance activities are recognised by the HEIs, the Government, and other stakeholders.

Reflections

At present, UKÄ is the official national quality assurance agency, and participation in the agency's external quality assurance activities is mandatory for Swedish HEIs. However, following closely the rapid development in cross-border quality assurance, and recent initiatives such as the European Universities, UKÄ has identified a number of issues affecting the national quality assurance framework, as well as the administrative burden reviews and evaluations place on HEIs, such as the following:

- Swedish regulations and procedures influence the possibilities for HEIs to implement and fully participate in joint programmes.
- UKÄ as a public authority is only allowed to operate within the national context.
- Swedish national legislation does not recognise quality assurance conducted by other EQAR-registered organisations, which may affect Swedish HEIs, for example, in European Universities or other alliances.

In order to investigate these issues, UKÄ has initiated a project which recently published a report on Swedish HEIs' experiences of quality assurance of European Universities alliances and joint programmes.

The next step in this internal work will explore future scenarios, based on policy developments in internationalisation and the increased integration of European higher education. Informed by these scenarios, UKÄ will investigate possible adaptations needed within the existing national regulatory framework.

Supporting documents

1 Ordinance with instructions for the Swedish Higher Education Authority (2012:810) (in Swedish. A non-official English translation is available)

2 Public service agreement for 2025 for the Swedish Higher Education Authority (in Swedish)

3 The Higher Education Ordinance (1993:100)²⁷ (in English)

4 Transnational Quality Assurance. Swedish higher education institutions' experiences of quality assurance of European Universities alliances and joint programmes, UKÄ 2024.

5.3. ESG Standard 3.3 Independence

Standard

Agencies should be independent and act autonomously. They should have full responsibility for their operations and the outcomes of those operations without third party influence.

Recommendation from the previous review: 'The panel recommends that UKÄ should take measures to further safeguard its capacity to independently design its methodologies in external quality assurance.'

EQAR 2021: 'The Register Committee could not concur with the panel's decision and concluded that UKÄ only partially complies with standard 3.3.'

Organisational independence

The Government establishes the general principles for UKÄ in the ordinance with government instructions (4.1), allocates resources, and follows up the activities, among them quality assurance. Accordingly, UKÄ's instructions only describe the overall activities in the national framework for external quality assurance of higher education and research, namely that UKÄ is responsible for quality assurance as described in chapter 5.1.

The independence of Swedish government agencies, including UKÄ, is safeguarded in national legislation. Crucially, neither the Parliament nor the Government or other authorities may interfere with UKÄ's decision-making, as laid down in the Instrument of Government (the Swedish Constitution) chapter 12 section 2 (3.2).

UKÄ's independence towards HEIs is safeguarded through the fact that there are no financial ties between UKÄ and the HEIs, and no fees are connected to UKÄ's external quality assurance activities. Instead, UKÄ receives its full funding from the Government through allocations from the state budget (5.5). HEIs are obliged by law to provide any data or

²⁷ Chapter 1, section 12

information requested by UKÄ, thereby enabling the agency to work effectively and without third-party influence.

Although continuous dialogue with relevant stakeholder groups such as HEIs, students' unions and labour market organisations is important, UKÄ acts independently with regard to these groups.

Operational independence

UKÄ decides independently on the design, implementation, and decision-making of its methodologies and outcomes in external quality assurance activities, as in all its operations. Accordingly, the national framework for quality assurance, first developed and implemented in 2016 – 2017, and revised 2022 – 2024, was decided by UKÄ without undue influence from the Government or other third parties. Thus, the recent revision of the national quality assurance framework, with amended processes, procedures and criteria (6.2 and 6.5), is a clear example of how UKÄ operates and makes decisions independently, while in close dialogue with its stakeholders.

As described in 4.3, UKÄ is led by the Director General, or in case of absence or conflict of interest, by the Deputy Director General. The Director General is appointed by the Government after an open call, acts on behalf of UKÄ, holds the final responsibility for the agency's activities, and reports directly to the Government. The Deputy Director General is appointed by the Director General. Currently, the head of the Department of Higher Education Analysis is appointed Deputy Director General. An Advisory Council is appointed by the Government, but has no decision-making powers and thus does not fulfil the role of a board (see details in 4.3).

UKÄ manages its staff independently, including competence supply, creation of positions, recruitment, contracting, salaries, competence development, and dismissal.

External experts – subject experts, student representatives, and labour market representatives – are appointed to assessment panels by UKÄ after a nomination process during which HEIs, students' unions and labour market organisations are invited to nominate candidates. No external parties are involved in UKÄ's decision. The selection and training of UKÄ's peer review experts, as well as procedures against conflicts of interest, are described in detail in 6.4.

Independence of formal outcomes

Decisions on the outcome of the external quality assurance activities are made independently by UKÄ. The decisions are based on the assessment panels' reports produced by the recruited external experts. All assessment reports are published (6.6), and HEIs have the possibility to register complaints or appeals (6.7). Decision-making procedures for all UKÄ's

operations are laid down in the Rules of procedure at the Swedish Higher Education Authority (internal document in Swedish).

Reflections

Historically, the level of independence in the relationship between UKÄ (and its predecessor HSV) and the Government has at times been debated. The current government instructions are rather brief and held in general terms concerning UKÄ's external quality assurance activities.

No formal changes in UKÄ's legal or organisational status have occurred since the last review, and no changes are foreseen, to the knowledge of the agency. Judging from UKÄ's dialogue with the higher education sector and the recent stakeholder survey (7.1), UKÄ's stakeholders find these arrangements on the whole satisfactory. However, as pointed out in 5.3, other aspects of UKÄ's independence remain an important area to safeguard, for instance, in relation to a fairly high number of government assignments to the agency, a concern also raised by stakeholders (7.1), although, in general, they consider that UKÄ balances this situation well.

In addition to the decision-making independence of UKÄ as a government agency regulated by the Instrument of Government (the Constitution), the Principle of public access to information is a fundamental principle in Sweden's form of government. One of the fundamental laws, the Freedom of the Press Act, contains provisions on the right to access official documents. This guarantees democratic transparency and contributes to safeguarding UKÄ's organisational, operational and decision-making independence from undue third-party influence.

Supporting documents

1 Ordinance with instructions for the Swedish Higher Education Authority (2012:810) (in Swedish. A non-official English translation is available)

5 National quality assurance framework – to strengthen the quality of higher education and research (draft in Swedish)²⁸

6 The Instrument of Government (1974:152) (in English)

7 The Freedom of the Press Act (1949:105) (in English)

8 Public access to information and secrecy. The legislation in brief, Ministry of Justice 2020 (in English)

²⁸ A non-official translated version will be available in English at the site visit.

9 National framework for quality assurance of higher education. Presentation of a government assignment, UKÄ Report 2016:15 (in English)

10 Rules of procedure at the Swedish Higher Education Authority (internal document in Swedish)

5.4. ESG Standard 3.4 Thematic analysis

Standard

Agencies should regularly publish reports that describe and analyse the general findings of their external quality assurance activities.

UKÄ regularly conducts thematic analyses based on completed external quality assurance activities, comparing results and highlighting common findings. This includes carrying out in-depth analyses of the results of its quality assurance focusing on selected themes, with the aim of increasing knowledge of factors that promote quality in higher education and research. The common goal of these analyses is to contribute to quality in HEIs' quality assurance processes and programmes, as well as in higher education in general. To analyse and reflect on completed quality assurance activities, the content of HEI's self-evaluation reports, and the findings of the assessment panels is also important for the contribution to a knowledge-based development of the methodologies behind the activities as such.

UKÄ's annual report to the Government on how UKÄ's external quality assurance contributes to enhanced quality in HEIs' operations also comprises an important thematic analysis.

5.4.1. Thematic analysis of assessment results

UKÄ conducts external quality assurance activities in regular rounds of reviews and evaluations, and analyses of results are often made after completed rounds. The aim of these analyses is continuously to develop and improve the processes of upcoming quality assurance activities, and to spread insights and examples of good practice within the sector.

In larger programme evaluation rounds, the assessment panels summarise and evaluate the national situation for the programmes assessed in their published report. Although not elaborated thematic analyses in the stricter sense of the standard, these reflections highlight important aspects of higher education brought out by the evaluation, and may provide valuable input to further thematic analysis conducted by UKÄ, HEIs, or others. Similarly, each thematic evaluation (6.2.4) provides a system-wide

picture of how HEIs perform on the theme under investigation; therefore, this part of thematic evaluations can be considered thematic analysis (an observation also made by the panel of the previous ENQA review). In UKÄ's appraisal of applications for degree-awarding powers, recent topics for thematic analysis have been a follow-up of all granted degree-awarding applications in third-cycle education during a ten-year period (roughly 2010 – 2020), experiences and conclusions from all applications for degree-awarding powers appraised by UKÄ 2017 – 2021, and recommendations on how HEIs can cooperate regarding degree permits. As for institutional reviews, a working group has been tasked with further developing the thematic analysis activity building on results from the first reviews of the current review cycle, as part of a more comprehensive initiative on department level (see Reflections below).

In 2020, following a government assignment, UKÄ underwent an external evaluation of the national quality assurance framework, which also produced a thematic analysis with a particular focus on the student and labour market perspectives (4.4). The annual report to the Government for 2024 showing how UKÄ's external quality assurance has contributed to quality improvement and high quality in the HEIs' operations will be finalised in spring 2025.²⁹

5.4.2. Planning for analysis

Following up and analysing its external quality assurance activities is an integral part of UKÄ's quality assurance work. For the quality assurance framework to be quality enhancing, findings are continuously analysed and reflected upon in order to generate insights into possible improvements.

Planning for thematic analyses is therefore an important step in the yearly planning of activities, resources, and budget of UKÄ's Department of Quality Assurance, as well as of UKÄ overall. The recurring analysis of completed review and evaluation rounds is part of the national quality assurance framework, and it is generally staff involved in the external quality assurance activities at the Department of Quality Assurance who will analyse the findings. In the annual process of operational planning, the department identifies what specific thematic analyses are of particular interest and allocates appropriate resources.

Reflections

The 2020 review panel suggested that more thematic analyses could be carried out, based on the vast amount of data collected by UKÄ. The panel believed that this could be stimulated by better cooperation between the various departments, each of which has valuable information at its

²⁹ A machine translation of the report will be available to ENQA's review panel before the site visit to UKÄ.

disposal. Indeed, since the last review, more analyses have been produced involving, above all, the Department of Higher Education Analysis and the Department of Quality Assurance. Thus, planning for new analyses, whether in the scope of the ESG or not, is now more closely coordinated between UKÄ's departments, a sign of the agency's development towards higher resource-efficiency and fewer internal silos.

The analysis of external quality assurance activities is complex in several respects. While it is relatively easy to identify common traits and qualities for HEIs and programmes with positive or negative results, it is more challenging to show how the quality assurance activities as such enhance quality. To follow up on findings of the activities in the long term is therefore essential to be able to conclude whether the intended effect of enhanced quality in higher education is obtained. Continuous analysis also is crucial to the assessment and adjustment of the quality assurance methodologies. In order to support a sustainable thematic analysis activity and strengthen the coordinated planning of analyses, UKÄ has formed a working group with the purpose to develop a process for thematic analysis at department level.

One measure of impact of the national quality assurance framework is the follow-up of HEIs and programmes that have received the assessment under review (6.2.1 and 6.2.2). Several follow-ups have been carried out since the last ENQA review, both of specific programmes and of institutional reviews, and UKÄ's analyses of those activities provide insights into how quality in higher education is enhanced. Such findings are included in the annual report to the Government on how UKÄ's external quality assurance contributes to quality enhancement at HEIs (5.4.3), and give input to specific thematic analyses. Allocating the necessary human resources for such follow-up analyses is sometimes a challenge to UKÄ, because of the workload generated by the agency's regular external quality assurance activities.

List of thematic analyses published since the previous ENQA review 2020

Förstudie inför utveckling av det nationella kvalitetssäkringssystemet. UKÄ 2021. (in Swedish)

Universitetskanslersämbetet, Studentperspektivet. En kartläggning av hur studentfrågor kommer till uttryck i UKÄ:s granskningar. UKÄ 2021. (in Swedish)

Universitetskanslersämbetet, Arbetsliv och samverkan. En kartläggning av hur arbetsliv och samverkan kommer till uttryck i UKÄ:s granskningar. UKÄ 2021 (in Swedish)

Forskarutbildning vid högskolorna En fråga om profilering. UKÄ 2021 (in Swedish)

Kvalitetssäkring och kvalitetsutveckling 2019. Redovisning till regeringen. UKÄ 2020. (in Swedish)

Kvalitetssäkring och kvalitetsutveckling 2020. Redovisning till regeringen. UKÄ 2021. (in Swedish)

Kvalitetssäkring och kvalitetsutveckling 2021. Redovisning till regeringen. UKÄ 2022. (in Swedish)

Kvalitetssäkring och kvalitetsutveckling 2023. Redovisning till regeringen. UKÄ 2024. (in Swedish)

Lärdomar av omställningen till distansundervisning under coronapandemin – för utformningen av framtidens högskoleutbildningar. UKÄ 2023. (in Swedish)

A system review. A summary analysis of the national system for quality assurance 2017–2022. UKÄ 2023. (in English)

Improving quality – a developed methodology for UKÄ's reviews. UKÄ 2024. (in English)

Stärka kvalitet och främja excellens i svensk högre utbildning. Förslag på hur det nationella kvalitetssäkringssystemet kan utvecklas. UKÄ 2024. (in Swedish)

Lärosätenas uppdragsutbildning Granskning av effektivitet, kvalitetssäkring och regelefterlevnad. UKÄ 2024. (in Swedish)

Utvärderingars inverkan på den administrativa bördan i högskolesektorn. En kartläggning. UKÄ 2024. (in Swedish)

Transnational Quality Assurance. Swedish higher education institutions' experiences of quality assurance of European Universities alliances and joint programmes. UKÄ 2024. (in English)

Institutional review 2020-2025

Några reflektioner och erfarenheter efter lärosätesgranskningarna i omgång ett. UKÄ memorandum 2019. (in Swedish)

Kartläggning av hur bedömning av perspektivet jämställdhet kommer till uttryck i UKÄ:s lärosätesgranskningar avseende utbildning. UKÄ memorandum 2021. (in Swedish)

Lärosätesgranskningar i omgångarna 2 och 3 – Reflektionsrapport. UKÄ memorandum 2021. (in Swedish)

Granskning av kvalitetssäkringsarbetet vid sex universitet 2021. UKÄ memorandum PM (in Swedish)

Programme evaluation 2020-2025

För ökad genomströmning. Sammanställning av lärosätenas insatser vid förskolläro- och grundläroarutbildningar. UKÄ 2020. (in Swedish)

Bedömning av jämställdhet i forskarutbildningar. En analys av metod och resultat i UKÄ:s utvärderingar. UKÄ 2020. (in Swedish)

Forskarutbildning vid högskolorna. En fråga om profilering. UKÄ 2021. (in Swedish)

A close-up of doctoral education. A thematic synthesis of results from third-cycle programme evaluations 2017–2022. UKÄ 2023. (in English)

Läroarutbildningarna: Kvalitet, utmaningar och strategier 2016–2022 UKÄ 2023. (in Swedish)

Appraisal of applications for degree-awarding powers

Ansökan om examenstillstånd. Om samarbeten. UKÄ 2021. (in Swedish)

Examenstillståndsprövningar 2017–2021. Erfarenheter och slutsatser. UKÄ 2022. (in Swedish)

Thematic evaluation 2020-2024

Universitets och högskolors arbete med att främja och bredda rekryteringen till högre utbildning. Tematisk utvärdering, del 1. UKÄ 2022. (in Swedish)

Perspectives on nursing education within the Swedish higher education system. Thematic evaluation of nursing education. UKÄ 2023. (in English)

Tematisk utvärdering av samverkan med det omgivande samhället. Nationell bild. UKÄ 2024. (in Swedish)

Supporting documents

1 Ordinance with instructions for the Swedish Higher Education Authority (2012:810) (in Swedish. A non-official English translation is available)

9 National framework for quality assurance of higher education. Presentation of a government assignment, UKÄ Report 2016:15 (in English)

11 Improving quality – a developed methodology for UKÄ's reviews (UKÄ 2024)

12 Evaluation of the national system for quality assurance in higher education. Analysis of the current cycle: 2017–2022, Faugert/Technopolis Group, 2020. (in Swedish)³⁰

5.5. ESG Standard 3.5 Resources

Standard

Agencies should have adequate and appropriate resources, both human and financial, to carry out their work.

5.5.1. Financial resources

Like other government agencies in Sweden, UKÄ is financed through allocations from the state budget.

Budget and funding

The funding framework for UKÄ for 2025 is SEK 173,554,000, according to the agency’s public service agreement for 2025, see table 2. This is a reduction compared to 2024 when the allocation was SEK 176,022,000 but equivalent to the level of the funding for 2023. The Government also notes in the Budget proposal for 2025 that the Government's aim is to increase efficiency in central government and that the Government considers that UKÄ will be able to carry out its tasks with slightly reduced resources.

Table 2. Source of funding (thousand SEK)

	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Administrative funding	158,416	171,751	173,509	176,022	173,554
Funding credit	4,752	5,152	5,205	14,081*	5,206
Funding saved from 2024	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	0

* The funding credit was revised by the Government in December 2024 from SEK 5,280,000 to SEK 14,081,000.

The allocation from the state budget is distributed internally between the departments after discussion and preparation by the management team and after decision by the Director General. The head of the department then decides on the internal distribution of the funds. The Department of Quality Assurance has had a relative stable funding for the external quality assurance activities over time, see table 3.

³⁰ A non-official English translation is available.

Table 3. Budget summary divided by department (rounded to thousands of SEK)

	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Department of Higher Education Analysis	40,041	46,675	46,940	46,696	45,783
Department of Legal Affairs	16,853	16,810	18,235	19,251	19,492
Department of Quality Assurance	45,322	48,300	44,980	45,147	46,597
Department for Operational Support (incl. Director General)	58,076	57,869	62,704	60,564	57,728
Strategic operational development		9,394	7,079	7,768	0
Total	160,292	177,049	179,215	179,426	169,600

When calculating the cost of completion, direct costs and indirect costs (overheads) are included.

Reflections

Even though UKÄ receives a reduced budget for 2025, the agency believes it will be able to fulfil the given assignments with high quality. As mentioned above, the Government in its Budget proposal for 2025 also considers that UKÄ will be able to carry out its tasks despite the somewhat reduced financial resources.

5.5.2. Human resources

UKÄ aims to be an attractive workplace where committed employees can develop (5.6, Quality Policy). The strategic competence provision work is an important element in achieving this goal and a prerequisite to fulfil the mission with high quality, relevance and efficiency. The competence provision work consists of three parts:

- Utilising, developing and retaining competences
- Attracting and recruiting new competences
- Terminating and utilising competences when a staff member leaves.

Since January 2025, UKÄ has had a complete permanent management team which provides a good basis for leading the agency's strategic work forward, in the short and long term. Until January this year, the management team consisted of one or more acting heads of department; for further information see section 5.6.

A review of the strategic competence provision work is being conducted from 2025. The importance of further developing the strategic competence provision work is an issue that the Swedish Agency for Public Management (Statskontoret) emphasised in its analysis of the agency in 2024. In the light of Statskontoret's report, the directive for operational planning for 2025 states that UKÄ's needs in terms of competence provision and competence development must be considered when planning activities in 2025, to ensure that the recruitments and

competence development measures made in the future correspond to the needs of the agency.

The internal guideline for competence provision provides support to heads of department in developing a competence management plan for each department. The guideline contains targeted questions to raise awareness of the challenges and changes that may affect operations over the next three years and how these can be addressed.

The ambition of the strategic work is then to develop an overall competence provision plan for UKÄ to ensure that the agency can secure sufficient and appropriate competence in relation to the organisation's mission and goals, both in the short and long term.

Staff members regularly take part in professional development activities or courses. For instance, on an international level, several staff of the Department of Quality Assurance have participated in the ENQA Leadership Development Programme since the last review, as well as in courses on the European Approach organised by ECA.

At the end of 2024 UKÄ had approximately 120 employees in total, which is an increase in comparison to 2020. The Department of Quality Assurance was the largest department with just over 40 employees (headcounts). The distribution of staff over the agency's departments is shown in table 4.

Table 4. Number of employees divided by department

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Department of Higher Education Analysis	26	30	34	40	37
Department of Legal Affairs	16	20	20	20	18
Department of Quality Assurance	39	39	40	38	42
Department for Operational Support	26	25	25	29	26
Total	107	114	119	127	123

The total number of employees at the Department of Quality Assurance has been relatively stable over time, see table 5.

Table 5. Number of employees at the Department of Quality Assurance, divided into different subgroups

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Management	3	3	4	4	4
Qualified officer/ Project manager	34	32	33	28	33
Officer / Administrators	2	4	3	6	5
Total	39	39	40	38	42

If the total number of employees at the Department of Quality Assurance is broken down into subgroups, it can be noted that the proportion of qualified officers that are set as project managers in the external quality

assurance activities has decreased by seven percentage points since 2020. During the same period an increase in the employment groups management and officers/administrators can be seen with two and seven percentage points, respectively.

Reflections

As mentioned earlier in this SAR, and noted in the SWOT analysis (chapter 9), an increase in governmental assignments and a reduction in funding may affect the volume of external quality assurance that UKÄ can accomplish without risking too high a workload and a potential increase in staff turnover. This risk is present as staff tasked with external quality assurance activities are also involved in other governmental assignments. In order to minimise this risk, the management team first discusses new government assignments and decides which department is to be responsible for carrying out the assignment. When responsibility falls to the Department of Quality Assurance, a dialogue is held between the head of department and the heads of group to identify the most suitable staff members to assume responsibility for the assignment. This is based, among other things, on the needs of the assignment and the competence and availability of staff. The project manager has the main responsibility for leading and coordinating the government assignment or the specific evaluation. The division of responsibilities within the project group is determined by the team itself, and, in the case of reviews, the project manager is often responsible for contacts with the HEI or programme managers and with the assessment panel. Moreover, using resources efficiently and refining internal processes is essential in the operational planning. Also, stricter prioritising, for example, the scope of thematic evaluations, and possibly postponing the start of other activities, may be necessary. Furthermore, the Department of Quality Assurance uses a multi-staff approach (that is, a project manager plus a co-worker) to the same evaluation project, which gives a good opportunity to ensure that the external quality assurance activities are conducted as planned and deliver expected results on time. Another factor that makes the external quality assurance robust in its implementation is that an assessment panel is responsible for the review, which means that UKÄ staff can more easily and quickly replace a colleague in case of illness or change of post.

In 2020, UKÄ moved into completely new offices, well equipped and fit for purpose. However, as this was during the first year of the pandemic, very few staff members actually worked on site at the time. UKÄ offered distance agreements to those who preferred, and this arrangement is still in place and highly appreciated by employees.

Supporting documents

2 Public service agreement for 2025 for the Swedish Higher Education Authority (in Swedish)

13 Public Service Agreement for 2024 for the Swedish Higher Education Authority (in Swedish)

14 Agency Analysis of the Swedish Higher Education Authority, Statskontorets myndighetsanalys (2024:2)³¹

15 Revised directive for the operation plan 2025 (Internal document in Swedish)

16 Guidelines for competence provision (Internal document in Swedish)

17 Annual report for the Swedish Higher Education Authority 2024 (in Swedish)³²

5.6. ESG Standard 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct

Standard

Agencies should have in place processes for internal quality assurance related to defining, assuring and enhancing the quality and integrity of their activities.

This section describes UKÄ's internal quality assurance procedures through which it ensures that the agency performs its tasks, achieves the objectives of its activities, and meets the requirements of the ordinance with instructions for UKÄ (4.1).

Management system

The management system clarifies the structure of the agency's governance, and the link between the agency's mission; vision and goals; planning and follow-up processes; risk analysis; and implementation of activities and operational development. The rules of procedure³³ explain UKÄ's organisation and delegation of authority. The internal governing documents at agency level govern and guide future decisions on

³¹ A non-official English translation is available.

³² A non-official translated version will be available in English at the site visit.

³³ Rules of procedure at the Swedish Higher Education Authority (internal document in Swedish)

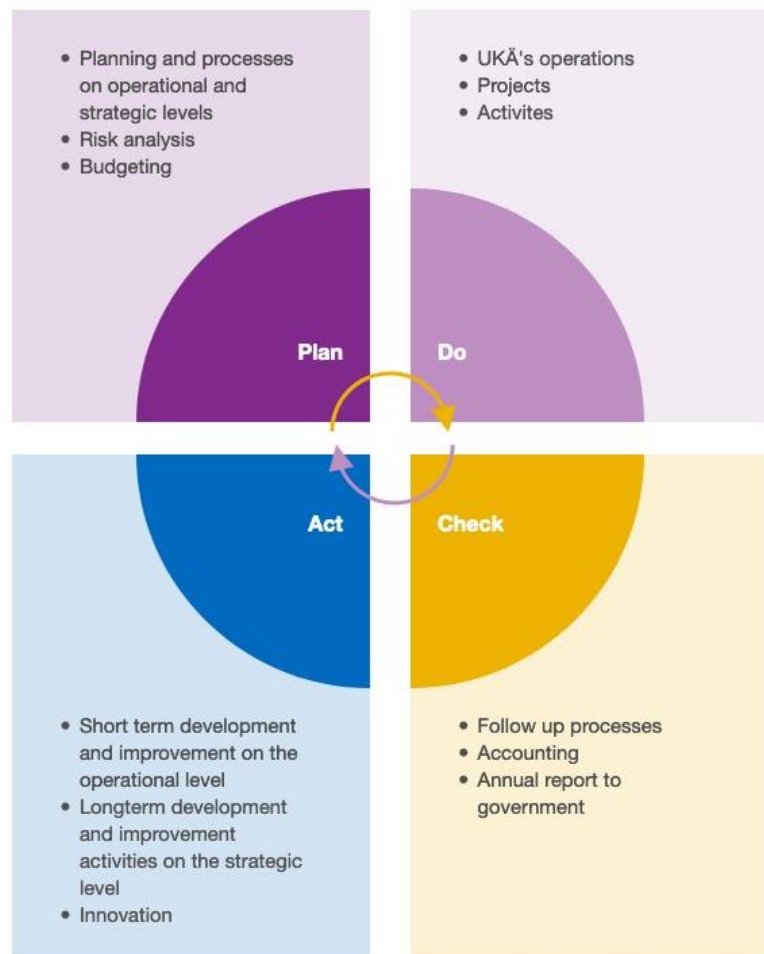
employees' actions. At department level, there are procedures that employees must follow in the performance of certain tasks. Taken together, the aim of the various elements is to create an organisational culture that contributes to the completion of the agency's tasks and the achievement of its objectives.

The management system is a tool for the agency to guarantee that its activities are carried out efficiently and with high quality. The processes for internal quality assurance are illustrated in figure 6, with clearly defined steps for planning, implementing, developing, follow-up, and reporting. The internal quality assurance procedures regarding UKÄ's external quality assurance activities are integrated in the overall management system. In addition to the processes of the management system, information security work has been established to create a high level of security awareness, maintain efficient and secure operations and management of the IT environment, and develop good practice for preventing and managing security incidents.

UKÄ operates with three levels of governance. Policies contain frameworks and descriptions for the organisation at an overall level, and guide employees on how to act on particular issues. They also guide future decisions. Guidelines set out how work is to be carried out and are aimed at the whole agency, guiding staff in a particular area or on a particular issue. Routines contain descriptions of specific steps or tasks at departmental level. Information about policies, guidelines, and routines is available to staff on the agency's intranet.

Figure 6. UKÄ's management system

UKÄ's planning and accounting processes



According to the rules of procedure, the Director General takes decisions at special meetings called decision meetings. The Director General decides on all matters of principle or major importance under the provisions of the rules of procedure, unless they have been delegated to the heads of department. They include UKÄ's rules of procedure and other governing documents, the operational plan, budget documents and annual accounts, authorisations to award degrees and the withdrawal of such authorisations, the adoption and publication of UKÄ's reports and other major publications. If the matter is important in principle and/or deviates from normal decisions, it may be discussed in advance at a management team meeting or during a preparatory meeting. The purpose of such a meeting is to ascertain whether the proposed decision is in line with the Director General's position on the matter, or whether the matter needs further preparation in any respect, and to discuss planned communication efforts. The head of department is responsible for ensuring that the case is quality assured before the decision meeting through the department's own procedures.

The departmental meetings of the Department of Quality Assurance are held once a week and provide a forum where issues and topics related to the quality assurance framework are discussed and followed up. Common development needs can be identified for further handling in the groups, and the groups can raise issues that need to be discussed at an overall/general level within the national quality assurance framework as a whole. This approach allows for continuous methodological development whereby different elements included in the reviews, both within the specific projects and within the process coordination, are continuously monitored.

Quality Policy

The overall direction for all activities of UKÄ is stated in the quality policy, which clarifies UKÄ’s vision of *Developmental Monitoring – Assuring Sweden’s status as a Knowledge Society*. The quality policy is available on the external website³⁴ and on the agency’s intranet. In order to reach the vision, UKÄ has formulated four goals and how to achieve them (figure 7).

Figure 7. UKÄ’s quality policy goals

Goal	How we achieve the goal
To be the acknowledged source of information about higher education and research.	We produce reliable knowledge about higher education and research such as statistics, analysis, quality assurance, and legal supervision.
Create results that are beneficial for the development of the higher education and research sectors.	We perform our tasks in dialogue with representatives for universities and university colleges, stakeholders, financiers of research, student unions, politicians and other decision makers. We are a user-friendly knowledge organisation and the results of our work are available through increasingly digitalised communication channels.
To be an attractive employer where dedicated employees have the possibility to develop.	We work to create an attractive workplace where employees enjoy working and experience well-being, enjoy good conditions to perform their job, participate and perceive their work as part of UKÄ’s mission. Systematic efforts for good work environment contribute to a sustainable working life. Employee’s competences are taken advantage of and there are career opportunities as well as possibilities to skills development.
To work coordinated and resource efficient.	Knowledge exchange, cooperation and collaboration between departments are natural methods of working at UKÄ. We perform activities with efficiency and economizing as guiding principles. We have established routines for gradual improvement and innovation.

All planning and organisational developments are based on the quality policy. The management of UKÄ annually organises time for planning

³⁴ <https://www.uka.se/swedish-higher-education-authority/about-us/our-management-system/quality-policy> (in English)

and development, in which all employees are expected to participate. Employees from all departments are hence involved in the planning and improvement of UKÄ's activities on a strategical level. The management regards the input as important contributions to the annual planning process. The operational and the financial controller participate in planning and reviewing processes throughout the year, with the aim of securing a stable financial situation. Heads of departments are responsible for setting up planning processes on department level, and in doing so, involving their staff.

Communication and dialogue

UKÄ aims for a long-term sustainable underlying structure for data and publications, and continue to develop seminars, conferences, and other forums for dialogue.

In order to achieve the quality vision, it is important that UKÄ's results are communicated effectively. UKÄ's primary target groups are the Government and the Ministry of Education, HEIs, and students. The agency strives to deliver data, analyses, and publications to make results and products available based on the needs of the target groups so that they benefit the development of the higher education sector. UKÄ has worked to improve its strategies to connect with HEIs and other stakeholders, for example, enhancing the dialogue with the Swedish National Union of Students. The agency uses several channels and methods to communicate results, such as the website, a podcast, an external newsletter, press activities, open information meetings, LinkedIn, and webinars. To achieve greater flexibility for the HEIs and enhance transparency, with regard to institutional reviews, UKÄ introduced digital meetings twice a year open to representatives from all HEIs.

Important arenas for dialogue with stakeholders are the permanent reference groups that represent UKÄ's stakeholders (4.3), the Advisory Council (4.3), and reference groups established in relation to specific projects or needs. UKÄ also benefits greatly from the cooperation and interaction with other national agencies, such as Statistics Sweden, the Swedish Council for Higher Education, the Swedish National Agency for Education, and the Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education.

Another forum for interaction with HEIs and stakeholders is Almedalen week, an annual open summer meeting where politicians, agencies and professional visitors meet with each other and regular visitors. During Almedalen week, the vice-chancellors of all HEIs are invited to a meeting with UKÄ. The meeting complements the annual management development activity offered to vice-chancellors that UKÄ organises as part of its work to promote managerial development in HEIs, a task included in the agency's instructions (4.1). The vice-chancellors and

UKÄ's management also meet in January each year, a meeting in which the Minister of Education and Research normally participates. In addition to this, UKÄ hosts a yearly conference for quality coordinators from HEIs, and participates in conferences organised by quality coordinators.

The Department of Quality Assurance has developed its dialogue-based work as described in 6.2. Further, as a way of receiving feedback regarding quality assurance activities, surveys are sent out after all types of completed reviews. UKÄ reaches out to all assessors and contact persons at HEIs with questions that have been continuously developed in the last 15 years, and which include specific questions for thematic evaluations. The aim of the surveys is to contribute to the continuous enhancement of UKÄ's work on reviews and evaluations. The questions regard UKÄ's contribution, the institution's input and the assessors' perception of the entire process. Contact persons at HEIs are also asked whether the review process contributed to the quality process of the HEI. Besides being reported annually to the Government, the responses are presented to relevant UKÄ staff and used in the agency's continual development.

The Department of Legal Affairs organises an annual Conference on the rule of law. The conference is mainly aimed at employees of HEIs and representatives of students' unions and similar organisations and authorities. The main purpose is to provide information about current activities and the results of decisions, as well as giving the HEIs an opportunity to ask questions. When necessary, the department also organises seminars and engages reference groups in connection with projects.

The Department of Higher Education Analysis communicates with stakeholders in various ways. Seminars, the website, and newsletters are all important channels, alongside the reports which are key products of the department's activities. To increase awareness of new reports, releases are carefully communicated, for instance, through webinars to which stakeholders are invited for presentations and discussions.

As described in 4.1, UKÄ is tasked by the Government to be responsible for the official statistics within higher education. A crucial part of this assignment is to make the statistics publicly available. Every year UKÄ publishes a report containing the statistics collected on higher education in Sweden with information about the preceding year, long-term trends, and international comparisons. An English version is also published, with a slightly different focus.

For a description of how UKÄ's dialogue-based approach is perceived, see section 7.1 about the stakeholder survey 2024.

Professional conduct

All state employees in Sweden must follow the common principles for good governance, which create the conditions for an administration that is democratic, efficient, legally secure, and free from corruption. UKÄ employees take part in an online course³⁵ offered by the Swedish Agency for Public Management (Statskontoret) for all Swedish state employees, ensuring that the staff is well informed about the role of the civil servant through the principles and basic ethical values of central government authorities. The principles are also stated in UKÄ's Employee and manager policy, available to staff on the intranet. How to understand and apply the principles in the daily work life has been the topic of workshops and staff meetings.

No elements in UKÄ's quality assurance activities are subcontracted to other parties. Regarding the professional conduct of UKÄ's recruited assessors, see section 6.4.

UKÄ's Guidelines for handling harassment, sexual harassment, reprisals and offensive discrimination are in line with the Swedish Discrimination Act (2008:567), and stipulate that UKÄ does not accept discrimination or harassment of any kind. Management and employees are all responsible for keeping and developing a working environment free from discrimination and harassment.

In the daily operations of the Department of Quality Assurance, employees find support in the guidelines for UKÄ's external quality assurance activities, and the Project manager's support tool, which describes and clarifies the steps of the review processes. Staff members in the Department of Quality Assurance are also assisted through digital support consisting of steering documents and guidelines, as well as descriptions of the various stages of the process and suggested working methods. This internal support is continuously monitored and updated as needed. There is, for instance, a logbook for the group conducting institutional reviews, within which needs for development are noted. The logbook is available for all group members and checked weekly.

Reflections

In preparation for the last review by ENQA in 2020, UKÄ developed new routines and policies for the internal quality assurance. These were applied in the internal management until 2024, when the Swedish Agency for Public Management (Statskontoret) conducted an external agency analysis of UKÄ. Statskontoret concluded that while UKÄ's internal governance worked well in many respects, the ongoing strategic digitalisation development needed to be settled. UKÄ was described as having a clear, well-considered, and documented structure for its internal

³⁵ <https://www.statskontoret.se/utb/your-role-in-central-government/#/>

governance and operational planning. However, Statskontoret also pointed at some areas relating to the internal management that needed urgent developing.

UKÄ began an extensive work on digital business development in 2020, partly out of need and partly due to visionary ideas. The initiated projects, mainly led by consultants, quickly grew in numbers. In its analysis of the agency, Statskontoret concluded that UKÄ was too small for such a large number of untested projects and had failed to perform proper risk analyses. Statskontoret therefore recommended UKÄ to prioritise the development work, perform a risk analysis, and reduce the need for consultants. UKÄ decided to terminate the contract with the main consultancy company and to end most of the projects. The remaining projects are to be integrated into the agency's own operational support. The changes led to some temporary turbulence in the internal governance. While UKÄ had followed the established policy documents and the systematic work on internal quality assurance (for example, quarterly follow-ups, risk analysis, annual reports, reporting to the Advisory Council, and monthly dialogues with the Ministry) to a large degree, a more comprehensive view was needed.

UKÄ's view was supported by Statskontoret, which reported a lack of cooperation between departments, resulting in silos and loss in efficiency and integration. The agency analysis concluded that UKÄ needs to continue the initiated process of ascertaining a common understanding of the mandated assignment and the methods of reaching it. An important part of that aim is to ensure communication between the management team and the employees, as well as working towards further integration between the departments and internal groups to prevent the persistence of silos. UKÄ has since improved opportunities for dialogue between employees by staffing projects with members from different groups and departments, and has implemented a more coherent dialogue between management and employees, including more focus on internal communication. An area of ongoing development is the annual planning and budget process, where the involvement of staff has been reinforced.

UKÄ has viewed the findings of Statskontoret as helpful recommendations with which to improve its operational strategy, and the new management team is preparing to adjust the strategy work. It is seen as of great importance that the management team works to unify groups and departments, and collaboration between them. A three-year plan for activities rather than a one-year plan, in order to gain a better overview, has been initiated. Until a new strategy is entirely in place, UKÄ works in accordance with existing policies and routines and adjusts these when necessary. The guideline for operational planning is updated once a year. The directives for the 2025 operational plan emphasise the core activities and describes the common priorities for the year.

Regarding dialogue, UKÄ has seen that the surveys sent to the HEIs after each completed review could be utilised in a more systematic way. The responsibility has been rather oriented on individuals who have sometimes struggled to find time for the task. A working group with members from different groups within the Department of Quality Assurance has now been set up to work on the design and use of the surveys, with the aim of improving systematic communication with the HEIs.

In terms of professional conduct and internal competence development, the introductory online course for assessors (6.4.2), recently introduced, changes to some extent the role of staff members involved in the projects. Previously, it was the task of project managers to introduce assessors to the process in the initial meeting. Since assessors now participate in an online introduction and arrive to the first meeting more prepared, project managers need internal development training to meet the new requirements. This includes deeper discussions about the task, responsibilities and roles in the assessment panel, and various ethical dilemmas that can occur in the process. This has been the topic of several meetings, and staff members have been allocated the task of holding workshops to prepare project managers responsible for the first rounds of projects in which assessors take the online course. The experiences of these project managers will then be shared among co-workers and groups.

Supporting documents

10 Rules of procedure at the Swedish Higher Education Authority (Internal document in Swedish)

14 Agency Analysis of the Swedish Higher Education Authority, Statskontorets myndighetsanalys (2024:2)³⁶

17 Annual report for the Swedish Higher Education Authority 2024 (in Swedish)³⁷

18 Operational plan Swedish Higher Education Authority 2024 (Internal document in Swedish; A non-official English translation is available)³⁸

19 Guidelines for systematic information security work at the Swedish Higher Education Authority (Internal document in Swedish)

20 Quality policy (in English)

21 Guidelines for the management of internal governing documents (Internal document in Swedish)

³⁶ A non-official English translation is available.

³⁷ A non-official translated version will be available in English at the site visit.

³⁸ Operational plan for 2025 will be available at the site visit.

22 Guidelines for managing irregularities, representation, conflicts of interest, and secondary employment (Internal document in Swedish)

23 Disclosure of conflict of interest in assignments for the Swedish Higher Education Authority (Internal document in Swedish)

24 Guidelines for recruitment at the Swedish Higher Education Authority (Internal document in Swedish)

25 Employee and manager policy (Internal document in Swedish)

26 Guidelines for handling harassment, sexual harassment, reprisals and offensive discrimination at the Swedish Higher Education Authority (Internal document in Swedish)

5.7. ESG Standard 3.7 Cyclical external review of agencies

Standard

Agencies should undergo an external review at least once every five years in order to demonstrate their compliance with the ESG.

UKÄ is undergoing its second external review for renewal of ENQA membership and EQAR registration.

Recommendations and suggestions from the previous ENQA review gave valuable input to the further methodological development of UKÄ's external quality assurance activities, as well as to the agency as a whole. The voluntary progress visit organised in early 2023 was particularly useful, as it provided an opportunity for the agency to discuss with the previous panel chair and secretary about the measures implemented or planned by UKÄ to address the panel's recommendations. A description of UKÄ's actions taken is to be found in chapter 8, and under each standard (3.3, 2.2, 2.3 and 2.7).

The period since the last review has been characterised by the comprehensive revision of the quality assurance framework described and explained throughout this report (6.2 and 6.5, in particular). As the assessment cycle 2017 – 2022 drew to an end, an extensive development work was initiated, in close dialogue with HEIs and other stakeholders. Although a number of follow-up reviews and evaluations from the previous cycle were also conducted, and the process of appraisal of applications for degree-awarding powers was uninterrupted, the revised institutional reviews and programme evaluations were only rolled out as from the end of 2024. A consequence of this is that relatively few results

from the revised activities were available at the time of writing UKÄ's self-assessment report.

Since the previous review, UKÄ has explored new ways of finding synergies between its operations and departments, guided by the goals of the agency's quality policy (5.6). In 2022 – 2024, with the aim of further integrating the agency's operations and reducing the administrative burden on HEIs, UKÄ piloted a new working method integrating several perspectives represented by the agency's departments: quality assurance, regulatory compliance, and resource-efficiency (5.4.2). Lessons learnt from this coordinated approach have fed into the agency's development work, and planning for new analyses – whether in the scope of the ESG or not – is now more closely coordinated between UKÄ's departments.

The five years since the last ENQA review have also seen an increase in UKÄ's international activity. Having successfully applied for membership of ENQA in 2020, UKÄ was registered on EQAR in 2021; in 2023, Sweden also became a governmental member of EQAR. In 2023, internationalisation was a priority area in the agency. A new group was established within the Department of Quality Assurance with the aim of strengthening international presence, collaboration and peer learning, and UKÄ has increased its visibility in a number of European arenas, such as networks, working groups, organisations, and conferences (4.2).

The Covid-19 pandemic entailed necessary adjustments to UKÄ's methodologies. However, UKÄ already had a long experience of using online interviews in its quality assurance, and robust infrastructure in HEIs and the agency made the transition relatively seamless. Very few reviews or evaluations had to be postponed, and on the whole, agreed timelines could be respected. The previous review of UKÄ was ENQA's first online agency review, and provided useful experiences for all those involved.

In relation to the pandemic, UKÄ was tasked by the Government to follow-up on the consequences for higher education and research of decisions and initiatives taken. This involved all UKÄ's departments and resulted in a number of reports.³⁹

³⁹ [The Swedish Higher Education Authority's Pandemic Assignment: Final report, UKÄ 2023](#) (in English)

6. Design and implementation of UKÄ's EQA activities (compliance with Part 2 of the ESG)

This chapter addresses each standard of ESG Part 2 for UKÄ's external quality assurance activities.

6.1. ESG Standard 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance

Standard

External quality assurance should address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the ESG.

A key principle of the national framework for quality assurance is recognition of HEIs' autonomy and responsibility for their internal quality assurance. UKÄ's role, as the designated quality assurance agency, is to ensure that HEIs fulfil their responsibility. An overall goal of UKÄ's external quality assurance activities is to help to ensure that the operations conducted at HEIs maintain high quality.

An overview of the national framework for quality assurance of higher education and research is presented in section 5.1, and in further detail in 6.2, 6.3, and related subsections. The framework, consisting of four external quality assurance activities, is based on national legislation on higher education and on the ESG. A methodological development work has been carried out during 2021–2024 in order to make UKÄ's national framework for quality assurance more flexible, accurate and resource-efficient (6.2). As a result, there is now a clearer distinction in the purpose and focus of the four external quality assurance activities, which now better complement each other. Due to these differences in purpose and focus, however, not every standard is explicitly addressed in each activity. Instead, UKÄ puts a stronger emphasis on addressing the effectiveness of HEIs' internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the ESG via the entire agency's remit in general, and the national framework for quality assurance in particular. Standards or parts of a standard that are

heavily dependent on legal compliance are mainly addressed through legal supervision rather than by any of the external quality assurance activities.

The relation between UKÄ's external quality assurance activities, Swedish legislation, and the ESG Part 1 is presented in table 6. The mapping grid does not include information on how evaluation questions and guidelines⁴⁰ used for programme evaluations and appraisal for degree awarding powers, respectively, relate to ESG part 1.

⁴⁰ **Programme evaluations:** each assessment criterion is followed by evaluation questions to make it easier for the HEI to describe, analyse and evaluate how the assessment criterion is fulfilled using concrete examples. **Appraisal of applications for degree awarding powers:** each assessment criterion is followed by guidelines for the application what to be included for each criterion.

Table 6. Mapping of how UKÄ's external quality assurance activities and Swedish legislation relates to the ESG Part 1, i.e. how each standard is addressed in each activity

Standard	Institutional reviews	Programme evaluations	Appraisal of degree-awarding powers	Thematic evaluations ⁴¹	Swedish legislation
1.1 Policy for quality assurance	AC 1 ^I Established procedure and quality culture				
1.2 Design and approval of programmes	AC 4 Establishment and discontinuation	AC Goal/target attainment (first-, second- and third-cycle evaluations)	AC Main field of study/Subject area and main field of study/Subject area (application for awarding powers for first, second, third-cycle or professional degrees) AC Ensuring qualitative targets AC Policy documents	Evaluation widening participation in HE: AC Design, implementation and outcomes	HL ^{II} 1 ch 4 – 4a §§ HL 2 ch 7 § HF ^{III} 6 ch 4 §, 9 -11 §§, and 13 – 17 §§ HF Annex 2
1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment	AC 8 Student-centred learning		AC Educational environment/third-cycle level environment		HL 5 ch 1 § HF 6 ch 24 § HF 12 ch 2 §, 5 § FL ^{IV} 33 §, 38 §, 41§, and 44 §§
1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification					HF 6 ch 3 §, 4 §, 6 – 7 §§, 9 – 11 §§ HF 12 ch 2 § Instr. UHR ^V 2 § p1, and 7 §
1.5 Teaching staff	AC 6 Competence supply and professional development	AC Staff resource (first-, second- and third-cycle evaluations)	AC Staff	Evaluation of widening participation in HE: AC Design, implementation and outcomes Evaluation of general nurse care education: AC Preconditions	RF ^{VI} The Public Employment Act The Employment Ordinance 6 -7 §§ HL 3 ch 1 -2 §§ HF 2 ch 2 § p 9 HF 4 ch 3 – 4 §§
1.6 Learning resources and student support	AC 5 Student support, learning resources and infrastructure	AC Staff resource (first-, second- and third-cycle evaluations),	AC Resources	Evaluation of widening participation in HE: AC Design, implementation and outcomes	

⁴¹ How the standards are addressed in thematic evaluations depends on the theme and scope of the evaluations conducted. The information in the table reflects the assessment criteria used in the thematic evaluations of widening participation in higher education (conducted mainly during 2021), and nursing education (conducted mainly during 2022). ESGs are partly addressed by the disclosed assessment criteria. The thematic evaluation of HEIs' collaboration with the surrounding community (conducted mainly during 2024) did not cover specific ESGs.

	AC Third-cycle programme environment (third-cycle evaluations)	Evaluation of general nurse care education: AC Preconditions	
1.7 Information management	AC 2 Continuous monitoring	Evaluation of widening participation in HE: AC Design, implementation and outcomes	
1.8 Public information	AC 1 Established procedure and quality culture, AC 2 Continuous monitoring, AC 3 Periodic reviews		Instr. UHR
1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes	AC 2 Continuous monitoring, AC 3 Periodic reviews	Evaluation of widening participation in HE: AC Design, implementation and outcomes	HL 1 ch 4 – 4a §§ HF 1 ch 14 §
1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance	AC 3 Periodic reviews		HF 1 ch 12 § Act concerning authority to award certain qualifications 6 § Instr. UKÄ ^{VII} 2 § p2

^I AC = assessment criteria; ^{II} HL = The Swedish Higher Education Act (1992:1434); ^{III} HF = The Higher Education Ordinance (1993:100); ^{IV} FL = Administrative Procedure Act (2017:900); ^V Instr. UHR = Ordinance with instructions for the Swedish Council for Higher Education (2012:811); ^{VI} RF = The Instrument of Government (1974:152); ^{VII} Instr. UKÄ = Ordinance with instructions for the Swedish Higher Education Authority (2012:810)

Reflections

By the comprehensive revision of its methodology, further described in the next section (6.2), UKÄ now allows HEIs greater scope to demonstrate their responsibility for ensuring quality in their operations. On the one hand, the framework now places higher demands than before on HEIs to shape their internal quality assurance processes according to their own specific needs and conditions. On the other hand, the more active use in external quality assurance activities of a more robust knowledge as well as a dialogue-based approach better addresses the effectiveness of the HEIs' internal quality assurance processes. The changes enable external quality assurance activities to be customised in a way that further helps the HEIs to enhance and strengthen the quality of their operations. A challenge with the revised framework may be to encourage the HEIs to take ownership of their internal quality assurance system and refrain from adapting it to UKÄ's reviews. Through good dialogue with the HEIs, and support to the assessment panels, this can be achieved.

The revised framework and working methods are currently being implemented. Having been used only in a few reviews, it is still too early to conclude whether the framework is now better fit for purpose and sufficiently addresses the effectiveness of the HEIs' internal quality assurance processes. However, a recent stakeholder survey (7.1) indicates that, although workload is still often perceived by HEIs as too high, UKÄ's method development of the national quality assurance framework is experienced positively, with a good and open dialogue and high transparency.

The ESG Part 1 include a number of areas pertaining to matters that are regulated in the Swedish higher education statutes and other general regulations valid for all public authorities, for example, the Swedish Administrative Procedure Act (2017:900), and the Government Agency Ordinance (2007:515). The Swedish public management culture is heavily dependent on trust between authorities and the conviction that public authorities operate in accordance with national laws and regulations. In the previous cycle of institutional reviews, UKÄ performed a preparatory legal supervision activity to ensure that student rights are respected, and that HEIs comply with applicable rules and regulations in Sweden, such as the Higher Education Act, the Higher Education Ordinance, and the Administrative Procedure Act. The HEI supervision was coordinated with the institutional reviews of the HEIs' quality assurance processes, in such a way that the supervision of an HEI was conducted a few months before the start of the institutional review. This allowed both the HEIs and the assessment panel to take the results of HEI supervision into consideration for the institutional review. Despite entailing a desk-top approach and not a formal ESG activity, the legal supervision covered parts of ESG 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 1.5, and ESG 1.9. The

methodology for the supervision has been revised, and not yet implemented. One reason for this has been to await the outcome and conclusions from the working method of coordinating UKÄ's various assignments in a single review (6.2, Reflections). However, the fact that no preparatory legal supervision is carried out for a period does not have any major negative consequences for students and HEIs. The reason is that UKÄ's legal supervision also uses other methods in its reviews of the HEIs' compliance with the regulations (4.1). The legal supervision reviews whether HEIs comply with the regulations that apply to the HEIs' operations, including the Swedish legislation relevant to ESG Part I specified in Table 6. Moreover, UKÄ continuously reviews the application of Swedish legislation within the framework of our handling of individual complaints from students. It is not unusual for complaints against HEIs to concern issues that are also relevant to different parts of ESG Part 1, for instance, admission or credit transfer. If necessary, UKÄ can, within the framework of its complaints handling, carry out reviews that are relevant to, among other things, ESG 1.4. In addition to this, in Sweden students and other individuals can, to a certain extent, appeal decisions of public HEIs regarding admission, credit transfer, and diplomas, that is, issues related to ESG 1.4. The appeals are heard by the Higher Education Appeals Board (ÖNH), and it is the Department of Legal Affairs that is tasked with providing ÖNH with administrative support (4.3).

Another reflection made during the self-assessment process is that UKÄ's external quality assurance activities have low coverage of the HEIs' processes for recognition, part of ESG 1.4. One reason may be that recognition is within the remit of the Swedish Council for Higher Education (UHR). UHR is also responsible for advising HEIs in their decision of recognition. UKÄ has initiated a dialogue with UHR on how the two agencies can jointly act to externally assure HEIs' internal quality assurance of recognition. The dialogue may also touch on the admission procedure, where UHR is responsible for the national pooled admissions of students to first- and second-cycle programmes on behalf of the HEIs (as described in chapter 3).

Supporting documents

1 Ordinance with instructions for the Swedish Higher Education Authority (2012:810) (in Swedish. A non-official English translation is available)

3 The Higher Education Ordinance (1993:100) (in English)

6 The Instrument of Government (1974:152) (in English)

27 Guidelines for reviewing the HEIs' quality assurance processes for education and research (in English)

28 Guidelines for the evaluation of first and second-cycle programmes (in English)

29 Guidelines for the evaluation of third-cycle programmes (in English)

30 Guidelines for applications for degree-awarding powers (in English)

31 Guidelines for thematic evaluation of widening participation in higher education 2020 (in Swedish)

32 The Swedish Higher Education Act (1992:1434) (in English)

33 Administrative Procedure Act (2017:900) (non-official translation in English)

34 The Public Employment Act (1994:260) (non-official translation in English)

35 The Employment Ordinance (1994:373) (in Swedish)

36 Act concerning authority to award certain qualifications (1993:792) (in English)

37 Ordinance with instructions for the Swedish Council for Higher Education (in Swedish)

6.2. ESG Standard 2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose

Standard

External quality assurance should be defined and designed specifically to ensure its fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for it, while taking into account relevant regulations. Stakeholders should be involved in its design and continuous improvement.

Recommendation from the previous review: ‘The panel recommends UKÄ to go further in reducing the HEIs’ workload in its quality assurance activities. In doing so, UKÄ should consider to which extent the different activities can be integrated or complement each other better.’

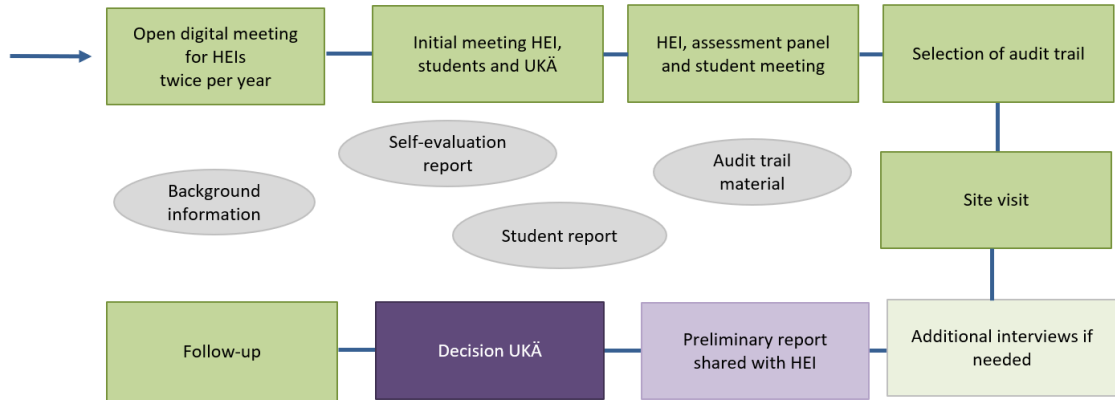
The following section gives an overview of the interlinked activities of the national framework for external quality assurance (4.1.1), assessment materials, processes, reporting, decision-making, and follow-up. Further details are provided under 6.3, and in UKÄ’s guidelines for each activity (see Supporting documents). For a general description of the aim and purpose of the four quality assurance activities in scope of the ESG, see 5.1.

6.2.1. Institutional reviews

Assessment process

The overall process for institutional reviews is described in figure 3.

Figure 3. Process for institutional reviews



The HEI's quality assurance processes for education and research are reviewed at the same time. The HEI submits a single self-evaluation report and chooses how much of the quality assurance processes for education and research is described jointly and how much is described separately. UKÄ makes separate decisions for the quality assurance processes for education and research. The decisions are based on two separate reports from the assessors.

The assessment is based on the following information: a self-evaluation report from the HEI, including annexes; a student report from the students' and doctoral students' unions; information from interviews; and documentation from selected audit trails.

Report and decision

The assessment panel's report specifies whether the HEI fulfils the assessment criteria. In order for reports to contribute to the HEIs' quality development, assessors also highlight strengths and examples of good practice.

Before UKÄ makes a decision, the assessment panel's preliminary report is sent to the HEI in order to give the institution the opportunity to point out any factual errors in the report.

The overall assessment of the HEI's quality assurance processes is given on a three-point scale. UKÄ decides whether to approve the quality assurance processes, to approve the quality assurance processes with reservations, or to decide that the quality assurance processes at the HEI

will be under review. The final report from the assessment panel forms the basis for UKÄ's decision. Each decision is valid until a new decision is made; this is dependent on the type of decision and on the applicable follow-up procedures (see below).

After the review has been completed, UKÄ holds a meeting at which the HEI, the students' union and representatives of the assessment panel, together with UKÄ, provide feedback and discuss the review process. UKÄ may also invite the HEI to participate in conferences on relevant themes for the exchange of experience and sharing of best practice, which may help the HEI to further develop.

The first decisions according to the new guidelines for institutional reviews were made in spring 2025.

Follow-up

UKÄ follows up all HEIs, including those with a positive outcome, an extended approach implemented since the previous ENQA review.

Quality assurance processes approved. HEIs whose quality assurance processes for education and/or research are approved are followed up with a dialogue on the recommendations and development areas described by the assessment panel in their report. The follow-up takes place approximately one year after the decision.

Development work is currently underway regarding the detailed routines and processes for the follow-up procedures. This work is to be completed by the end of April, and is expected to look like the following, subject to minor adjustments.

UKÄ contacts the HEI after a decision from the original review to determine a time for a dialogue meeting between the HEI and the assessors. Before the meeting, the HEI is asked to inform UKÄ on which recommendations and development areas in the previous report it wants to focus in the dialogue with the assessment panel. Here, the HEI also has the opportunity to report on initiated and planned development work, which facilitates feedback from the assessment panel at the dialogue meeting. The assessors are also given the opportunity to suggest content for the meeting. In addition to the HEI and the assessors (ideally the assessors from the original review), UKÄ also participates in the dialogue meeting, which is conducted digitally. In the follow-up of HEIs with approved quality assurance work, no decisions are made and no statements or reports are produced.

Quality assurance processes approved with reservations. HEIs whose quality assurance processes for education and/or research are approved with reservations are followed up with respect to the assessment criteria that have been assessed as not fulfilled. The HEI is obliged to submit a report on the measures implemented no later than two years after the

decision. UKÄ appoints an assessment panel to follow up the measures. If deemed necessary, the follow-up includes supplementary documentation and interviews. The assessment panel writes a report, on which UKÄ bases its follow-up decision applying the same scale of judgements as in the initial review.

Quality assurance processes under review. HEIs whose quality assurance processes for education and/or research are under review are followed up with respect to the assessment criteria that have been assessed as not fulfilled. The HEI must submit a report on the measures implemented no later than two years after the decision. An assessment panel is appointed to review the account of measures. The follow-up review will include supplementary documentation and interviews, as necessary. The assessment panel writes a report, on which UKÄ bases its follow-up decision applying the same scale of judgements as in the initial review.

Supporting documents

27 [Guidelines for reviewing the HEIs' quality assurance processes for education and research](#) (in English)

6.2.2. Programme evaluations

Selection process

UKÄ initiates a programme evaluation for the following reasons:

- UKÄ has reason to believe a specific programme risks failing to meet statutory requirements.
- UKÄ has reason to believe more knowledge is required about a programme in order, for example, to analyse the challenges and need for development at a national level. UKÄ has a specific focus on programmes leading to a professional qualification.
- The Government may task UKÄ with conducting an evaluation, for example, to obtain a picture of the national situation on which to base a decision, or to follow up a given programme.

UKÄ makes a selection of the programmes for evaluation. The selection is based on the knowledge and experience accumulated from UKÄ's previous quality reviews, efficiency analyses, statistics and supervisory cases, as well as the agency's monitoring of the sector and dialogue with HEIs.

The flowchart below illustrates the main elements of the evaluation process (the term ‘pilot study’ is also referred to as ‘pre-study’ below):



Pre-study and adaptation

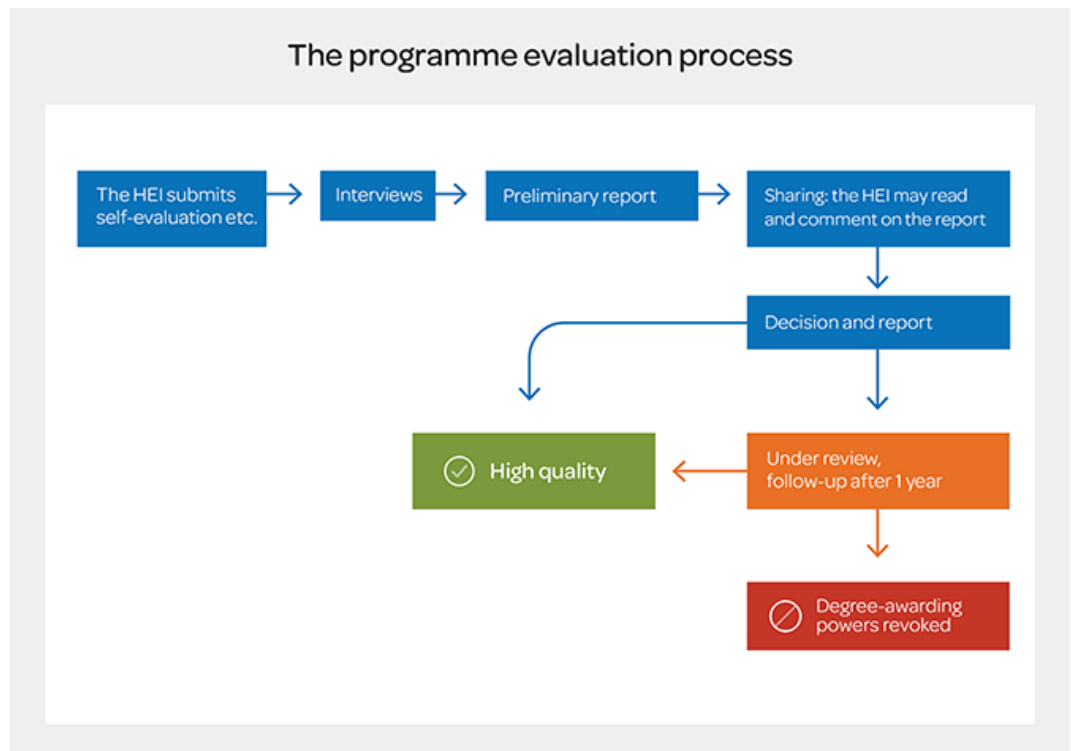
Before beginning an evaluation, UKÄ conducts a pre-study, the results of which are shared with the assessment panel and representatives of the HEI, students’ unions, and labour market organisations. The pre-study includes a compilation of UKÄ’s knowledge about the programme, such as statistics, results and analyses from previous reviews and government assignments undertaken by UKÄ, current trends, etc.

Based on the pre-study, the terms of reference of the evaluation are adapted to best meet the development needs of the programme and to ensure that the evaluation is fit for purpose, specifying what qualitative targets (3.1.1) or programme objectives should be evaluated.

Assessment process

The overall implementation process for programme evaluations is described in figure 4.

Figure 4. Process for programme evaluations



The basis for assessment of first- and second-cycle programmes is the HEI's self-evaluation report with appendices, first- and second-cycle degree projects or equivalent documentation, interviews with representatives of the evaluated programme and with students. The basis for assessment of third-cycle programmes is the self-evaluation report with annexes, the general study plan for the third-cycle subject, randomly selected individual study plans and interviews with representatives of the reviewed programme and doctoral students. All assessment materials for the evaluation are to be weighed together.

Report and decision

In their report, the assessors provide feedback to the HEI concerning examples of good practice and room for improvement identified in the assessment, both in relation to the assessment criteria and the programme in general. The assessment panel assesses each of the criteria, after which it drafts an overall judgement.

The assessment panel's preliminary report is sent to the HEI for a factual accuracy check. The HEI's response is included as an appendix to the final report. The final report is 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, or 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 panel, which the HEI is required to rectify within one year.

The first decisions according to the new guidelines for programme evaluations were made in spring 2025.

Follow-up

An HEI which has had its programme placed under review has one year to remedy deficiencies and submit a report of the measures taken, and UKÄ will appoint a new assessment panel – in most cases partly with experts from the previous panel – to review this report. The assessment panel's report, if necessary complemented with interviews, forms the basis on which UKÄ decides whether the programme is now of high quality or the HEI's degree-awarding powers should be revoked. If degree-awarding powers are revoked, the HEI may still award degrees to students who were admitted to the programme before the decision was made.

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 examples of good practice that

have emerged during the process. This dialogue meeting also provides an opportunity for HEIs to ask questions and give feedback to the assessment panel and to UKÄ.

Supporting documents

28 [Guidelines for the evaluation of first and second-cycle programmes](#) (in English)

29 [Guidelines for the evaluation of third-cycle programmes](#) (in English)

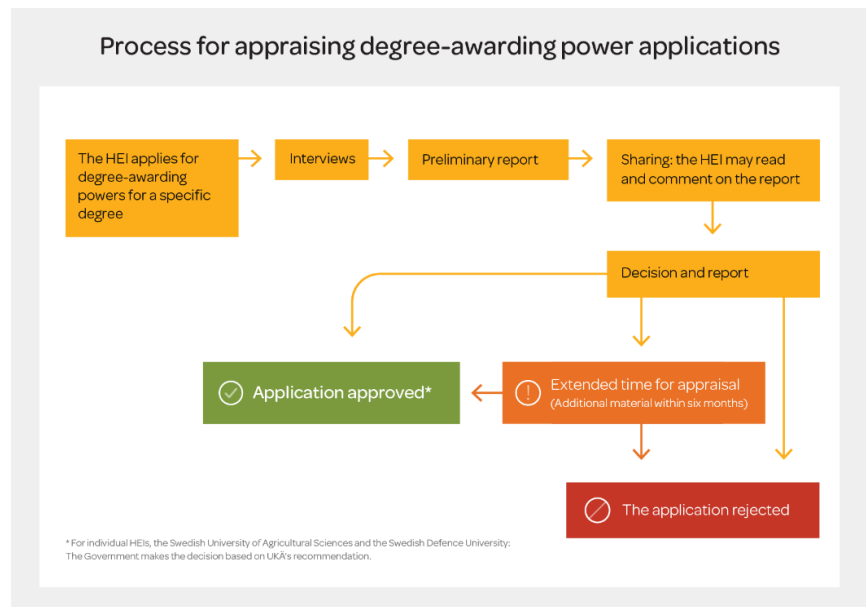
6.2.3. Appraisal of applications for degree-awarding powers

Most public HEIs in Sweden have independent powers to determine which degrees they may award, whereas independent higher education providers apply to the Government.⁴² The additional limitations as to what degrees each type of HEI may issue are described in 3.2.

Assessment process

The overall process for appraisal of applications for degree-awarding powers is described in figure 5.

Figure 5. Process for appraisal of applications for degree-awarding powers



⁴² The Government normally sends the application from an independent provider to UKÄ for assessment and report. UKÄ's assessment is not binding for the Government, but for the Government to deviate from UKÄ's proposal, there should be exceptional reasons. No cases where the Government should not have consulted UKÄ are known to the agency.

The assessment is based on the following information: the HEI's written application with annexes; interviews with the HEI, programme representatives, and students.

Report and decision

In a written statement, the assessment panel makes a recommendation to UKÄ as to whether the application should be granted or refused. In the event of a negative report, the report specifies what the assessment panel considers to be of insufficient quality. The assessment panel can point out areas for improvement, also when they suggest that the application should be granted.

The assessment panel's preliminary report is sent to the HEI for a factual accuracy check before UKÄ makes its decision, in order to give the HEI the opportunity to correct any factual errors. The HEI's response is added as an annexe to the report. The final report then forms the basis for UKÄ's decision. The decision normally follows the panel's conclusions, unless UKÄ deems that the assessment criteria have not been addressed correctly.

UKÄ's decision to reject or grant degree-awarding powers is based on the assessment panel's report with a recommendation for a decision and on the agency's deliberations. UKÄ's decision including the statement, the assessment panel's report and the HEI's application are published on UKÄ's website.

UKÄ may grant extensions of the appraisal period. Extensions are only possible when identified inadequacies can reasonably be remedied within six months. The assessment panel can recommend that UKÄ permit an extension. Inadequacies must be clearly defined in the report.

The first decisions according to the new guidelines for appraisal of applications for degree-awarding powers were made in spring 2025.

Follow-up

As from early 2025, UKÄ has implemented a follow-up procedure for all applications for degree-awarding powers with a positive outcome. Follow-up is conducted in two steps. In the first step, data is collected on how the degree-awarding powers are used, including information on the number of registered students, the students' performance levels and retention on a given programme. In a second step, a dialogue is organised with the managers of the new programme. The dialogue's focus is on particular challenges of the programme and how they have been tackled. Results from data collection and dialogue are published in a report. The purpose of the report is to spread information about the review procedure and to support potential new applicants for degree-awarding powers.

Supporting documents

30 [Guidelines for applications for degree-awarding powers](#) (in English)

6.2.4. Thematic evaluations

Thematic evaluations may assess how HEIs fulfil tasks of importance for quality in higher education assigned to them by legislation and ordinances. The evaluations can be initiated by UKÄ based on information obtained through UKÄ's external quality assurance activities, analyses, and other tasks. In addition, the Government may task UKÄ with performing thematic evaluations on certain topics.

The methodology applied to thematic evaluations is developed and adapted to the selected theme, but it follows the methods used for the other external quality assurance activities as relevant (6.3).

Since the last ENQA review, UKÄ has conducted the following three thematic evaluations (in addition to a first evaluation of sustainable development from 2017):

- Widening participation in higher education, 2022 / Universitets och högskolors arbete med att främja och bredda rekryteringen till högre utbildning. Tematisk utvärdering, del 1. UKÄ 2022.
- Perspectives on nursing education within the Swedish higher education system. Thematic evaluation of nursing education. UKÄ 2023.
- Thematic evaluation of collaboration with the surrounding community. Tematisk utvärdering av samverkan med det omgivande samhället. Nationell bild. UKÄ 2024.

As thematic evaluations provide system-wide pictures of how HEIs perform on the topic under investigation, relevant reports from the above evaluations are also listed as thematic analyses in 5.4.

Supporting documents

31 [Guidelines for thematic evaluation of widening participation in higher education](#) 2020 (in Swedish)

38 [Guidelines for thematic evaluation of nursing education](#) 2022 (in Swedish)

39 [Guidelines for thematic evaluation of collaboration with the surrounding community](#) 2024 (in English)

6.2.5. Design and fitness for purpose of UKÄ's external quality assurance activities

UKÄ has revised its methodology to enhance quality and decrease the burden for HEIs, assessors, and UKÄ. The recently revised methodology follows the same principles as the previous ones, with four components, peer review assessment, and a dialogue-based approach. The revised methodology is still based on the ESG, the Higher Education Act, the Higher Education Ordinance, the Government communication Quality assurance in higher education (4.4), and national and international guidelines for research.

6.2.6. Methodological development

A large number of quality assurance reviews were conducted in the last cycle of reviews between 2017 and 2022 (4.4). At the start of the cycle, it became apparent that many HEIs were still working on the development of their quality systems for programmes. At the end of the cycle, all HEIs had had their systems tested in practice. HEIs found UKÄ's reviews to contribute to quality development by increasing knowledge and commitment and identifying deficiencies. Hence, the reviews helped improve the quality in HEIs, but the evaluations were also resource-intensive.

A revised method was called for, and development began in 2021 with the aim of making future reviews more accurate and precise, flexible and less burdensome for HEIs, assessors, and UKÄ. The further development of the methodology was based on experiences from the last cycle and conducted in close dialogue with HEIs, and assisted by the collaboration with UKÄ's reference groups and the Advisory Council. The Advisory Council participated throughout the entire process through discussions and advice in every meeting from January 2021 to February 2023. The previous ENQA review and a national evaluation of the current cycle 2017–2022 (4.4), also included surveys and interviews with HEI representatives, providing extensive feedback from the HEIs on how UKÄ's external quality assurance activities affected their work and workload.

The method development process began with a pre-study conducted in 2021. A group of five staff members were involved in the study, which comprised a summary and analysis of all internal and external evaluations made since 2017. Further, the study involved internal focus groups with the management team as well as with all staff members of the Department of Quality Assurance. Finally, the main elements for revision were decided, as well as the working plan of the revision process ahead.

The main part of the method development process took place in three stages. A working group was set up consisting of a project manager, a deputy project manager, a secretary, and a representative from each of

UKÄ's four external quality assurance activities. The management team acted as a steering group. In the first stage, an overall analysis of the quality assurance framework as a whole was conducted, clarifying aims and activities. In-depth studies of certain perspectives (gender equality, student/doctoral, and labour market perspectives) were carried out, concepts were clarified, three workshops with 12 HEIs were held (identifying strengths and weaknesses of the quality assurance framework, as well as how to improve it), and in-depth interviews with agencies within ENQA (benchmarking NVAO, NOKUT, FINEEC, and AEQES) were conducted. Then, main changes and development proposals for each quality assurance activity were formulated.

In the second stage, the development within the four external quality assurance activities took place, each type of activity being addressed by a small working group suggesting concrete enhancements of the method and the criteria. Each working group also had continuous meetings on various topics with the three groups of the Department of Quality Assurance, as well as with representatives from HEIs and former peer-review experts, and UKÄ's reference groups and the Advisory Council.

The last stage focused on formulating guidelines. This took place in the working group for each external quality assurance activity, in dialogue with staff from the Department of Quality Assurance, as well as with the Advisory Council, UKÄ's reference groups, and representatives from the HEIs. The revised methodology was then gradually implemented for programme evaluations and appraisal of applications for degree-awarding powers from spring 2023, and for institutional reviews from spring 2024; as explained elsewhere, the methodology applied to UKÄ's thematic evaluations is developed and adapted to the selected theme, but follows the processes used in the other external quality assurance activities as relevant (6.2.4 and 6.3).

An overarching aim of the revised method was to make reviews and analyses more resource-efficient and quality-enhancing. It also needed to be further clarified that HEIs own the responsibility for their quality activities. UKÄ's reviews hence needed to adapt in order to offer HEIs opportunities to demonstrate how this responsibility is managed. A key aspect of the system is the shared responsibility between UKÄ and the HEIs for the quality assurance of higher education and research, and the purpose of the reviews to both monitor and contribute to quality enhancement. After the last cycle of reviews, the HEIs had developed their quality assurance processes and were able to take greater responsibility for the quality of their activities.

The basic principles of the improved methodology are the same as before, with peer review and method developments in consultation with HEIs, students' unions, and representatives of the labour market. There are still procedures for quality assurance of the processes prior to a decision, during the process, and after a decision has been made. In the planning

phase of a review process, HEIs are asked to nominate assessors and to give their opinion on the composition of the assessment panel and assessors' reported lack of conflicts of interest. Before the assessment panel begins its work, assessors are offered an online introductory course (6.4.2) to obtain knowledge and consensus about the process. At an early stage of the review process, the assessors systematically review all documents and decide whether any supplementary information is needed. Before UKÄ makes its decision, the assessors' preliminary report is sent to the HEI, which is given the opportunity to correct factual errors (6.6). Finally, after the decision has been made, HEIs have the possibility of making a complaint or asking for a reassessment (6.7). Information about these processes is available in the guidelines for HEIs undergoing reviews.

Most of the ESG standards are addressed within the framework of the institutional reviews of education and research, conducted within the Department of Quality Assurance. The task of the group conducting institutional reviews is organised into two main activities: reviews of specific HEIs, and a process coordination where internal quality assurance takes place. The process coordination activities are taken care of by groups appointed to work with different elements and report back to the group. That way, elements that are related to but independent of specific reviews are handled, such as assessor recruitment, assessor training, and various information meetings targeted at the sector. Within process coordination, work is underway to map the generic process for HEI reviews and develop an annual cycle for the implementation and quality assurance of HEI reviews during the period 2024 to 2030, and to continue work on detailed digital process support. This approach allows for continuous methodological development, since the different elements included in the reviews, both within the specific projects and within the process coordination, are continuously monitored and reflected upon.

Receiving feedback from assessors and HEIs is an essential aspect of the review process, and UKÄ gathers suggestions for improvements through various channels (5.6 and chapter 7).

6.2.7. Revision of methodology

The key words of the revised methodology are

- Flexibility
- Accuracy
- Resource-efficiency.

The four external quality assurance activities of UKÄ's quality assurance framework have been revised to better complement each other. This has resulted in fewer assessment criteria and the elimination of a superstructure with assessment areas. For programme evaluations, UKÄ has decided to abandon the previous more or less fixed six-year review

cycle concept, in favour of a more flexible and adjustable rolling plan and continuous quality review. This model still allows long-term planning for HEIs undergoing programme evaluations, while permitting annual adjustments to the external quality assurance methodologies, in dialogue with the HEIs. For HEIs undergoing institutional reviews of quality assurance, there is still a six-year plan, now with predetermined follow-ups regardless of outcome.

The design of the new approach is more firmly based on existing data, analysis and dialogue, with regard to UKÄ's internal knowledge and knowledge from external monitoring and dialogue with the sector and other authorities. In order to identify areas where UKÄ can be of greatest benefit, UKÄ's operational planning has been restructured to increase coordination in the selection process. Based on the agency's knowledge, a choice is made which activity should be carried out, whether it should be a review, analysis, mapping or workshop, and which area should be in focus.

From autumn 2021, **institutional reviews** of HEIs' internal quality assurance processes also include reviews for research. The reviews have been adjusted to contain fewer assessment criteria for education and research (down from 30 to 16), which have also been harmonised to be more accurate and precise. As a result, HEIs may now write a single self-evaluation instead of one each for research and education, which also facilitates the assessment process. In dialogue with UKÄ's reference groups (4.3), it has been decided that HEIs reviewed for both education and research will receive two reports from the assessment panels, in order to make the feedback as clear and helpful as possible (6.6).

Prior to the site visit, the HEI is given the opportunity to present its quality assurance system (as described in the self-evaluation report) during a digital meeting. UKÄ does not provide a template for the HEIs self-evaluation report, and HEIs can choose how to structure it, provided that it explicitly addresses all assessment criteria. To minimise the workload for all parties, the total number of audit trails (in-depth focus areas) covering both education and research has been limited to a maximum of three. The assessors conduct only one site visit with interviews at the HEI. Additional interviews can be conducted if necessary.

There are also changes in the method of the follow-up process of assessed HEIs. HEIs whose quality assurance work has been assessed as under review must submit a report on the measures they have implemented after two years. HEIs whose quality assurance processes were approved are also followed up, via a dialogue approximately one year after the decision. For transparency and assistance, UKÄ has published a plan covering institutional reviews up until 2030.⁴³

⁴³ <https://www.uka.se/for-larosaten/granskningar>

The programme evaluations focus to a greater extent than before on the programmes and areas where the need for improvement is found to be greatest, a decision based on pre-studies. The pre-studies synthesise UKÄ's existing knowledge, in order to adapt the content and form of the evaluation to maximise its usefulness.

In order to achieve more accurate and resource-efficient evaluations, UKÄ initiates a dialogue with assessors and representatives of the HEI, students and labour market, based on the established criteria and the results of the pre-study. The aim of the dialogue is to identify strengths and weaknesses at a principal level, and identify qualitative targets (3.1.1) or target components that should be evaluated. Based on the findings of the evaluation, UKÄ may initiate a workshop with the assessment panel and the HEI in order to further identify areas and aspects of improvement.

As for **appraisals of degree-awarding powers**, the requirements have become stricter. To shorten the process from application to decision, an application must now be complete before an assessment panel is appointed. UKÄ's project manager reviews received applications in a first step. If an application lacks important documentation, the applicant is contacted and given the opportunity to complete the application before it is assessed by the assessment panel. Also, since a common deficiency in previous applications was a lack of information about resources, intended collaborations, and the quality assurance of policy documents, these themes have become more salient. Furthermore, all assessment criteria must now be met for an application to be approved. UKÄ has concluded that it is important, especially for new providers of education, to list the requirements for obtaining permission to grant the degree in question. The criteria for this type of review are historically relatively detailed and there are also guidance texts under each criterion. This has to do with the fact that there are specific legal requirements listed in the Swedish law that must be met in order for degree-awarding powers to be granted. In sum, these improvements aim at refining the review process and make it more resource-efficient for HEIs, assessment panels, and UKÄ.

Thematic evaluations assess how HEIs fulfil tasks of importance for quality in higher education and research assigned to them by Acts and Ordinances. Thematic evaluations are always conducted with flexible methods since they are adapted to the theme in order to benefit as much as possible (6.2.4 and 6.2.6). Three thematic evaluations have been conducted since 2020: Widening participation in higher education (2020 – 2021), Thematic evaluation of collaboration with the surrounding community (2022 – 2024), and Perspectives on nursing education within the Swedish higher education system (2022 – 2024). All three themes were selected based on the new approach, that is, based on existing data, analysis, and dialogue. To ensure relevant and resource-efficient evaluations, pre-studies were conducted. The aim of the pre-studies is to identify and pinpoint the most relevant aspects of a chosen theme. The

pre-studies are based on available data from previous evaluations and analysis, legal framework and regulations, and historical background, as relevant. An important step in the pre-study consists of dialogues with key stakeholders at HEIs, including student representatives, but also from the surrounding society, such as actors on the labour market, to take into account what they put forward as most relevant to focus. This inventory step is conducted through interviews with stakeholders, and through reading and compiling results from research. An advisory group, consisting of experts on the selected theme recruited for the particular evaluation, is also involved in the pre-study, together with UKÄ's reference groups (4.3). An important part of thematic evaluations is UKÄ's feedback conferences to which HEIs are invited and where they share their experiences.

Reflections

The adjustments described above aim at more resource-efficient, flexible, accurate, and precise reviews. UKÄ strives to make its methods more robustly grounded in existing knowledge and dialogue within the sector. Previous results, reports and data, in combination with observations from horizon scanning, are used in a more systematic way. The dialogue-based approach allows UKÄ to adjust its procedures in accordance with HEIs' needs: for programme evaluations, assessment material is adjusted, and for institutional reviews, the dialogue is important to avoid burdening the HEIs with the production of excessive material for the assessment panel.

During the previous cycle, UKÄ learnt that the reviews added to the administrative burden of HEIs to a non-desirable degree. This was confirmed by three external evaluations of UKÄ's activities: ENQA's review in 2020, Faugert/Technopolis Group's review in 2020, and the Swedish Agency for Public Management's (Statskontoret) review in 2024. UKÄ had the opportunity to look further into this topic in 2024 when the agency was given a government assignment to map the impact of administrative burden related to evaluations on HEIs. The background was indications that staff in various sectors had been found to spend too much time and resources on less relevant administration rather than on their core tasks, and UKÄ was assigned to investigate HEIs' administrative burden generated by public agencies. The report described how a considerable degree of the burden was caused by UKÄ's external quality assurance activities, a finding well known to the agency, and the very reason behind the revised methodology already implemented. While the full impact of the improvements is yet to be seen, UKÄ continues to observe closely the balance between costs and benefits for HEIs undergoing review.

In 2022 – 2024, with the aim further to integrate the agency's operations, UKÄ piloted a new working method in an evaluation of contract education at HEIs. The evaluation included several perspectives: quality assurance, regulatory compliance, and resource-efficiency. As far as

quality assurance is concerned, the methodology followed UKÄ's external quality assurance framework, and these parts of the coordinated pilot evaluation were thus within the scope of the ESG.

The coordinated pilot evaluation is an example of UKÄ's ambition further to reduce the administrative burden on HEIs caused by the agency's operations in different areas, within or outside the scope of the ESG. In doing so, UKÄ aims to create maximum quality enhancement and value for the HEIs and the higher education sector at large. An evaluation of the pilot was made by UKÄ, which concluded that the coordinated review had a number of advantages, but also a number of challenges. In particular, the larger empirical basis available through the involved UKÄ departments lead to clear synergy effects and to the achievement of two important goals with the coordination: a more content-rich knowledge base that lead to new knowledge, and a more efficient use of both HEIs' and UKÄ's resources than if the review activities had been carried out separately. In addition to achieving such goals, the coordination generated cooperation and dialogue across departmental boundaries at UKÄ, and brought a team spirit within the agency. The evaluation of the pilot also revealed that sharper priorities are needed; support systems need to be developed; guidelines must allow room for flexibility; the risk of excessive workload must be managed; and parallel reviews may create ambiguity for the HEIs.

Another result from UKÄ's efforts to lessen HEIs' administrative burden caused by external quality assurance which the agency has already observed regards the appraisal of degree-awarding powers. With the recent changes, UKÄ has noted that applications received by the agency tend to be more complete. As an effect, the assessment panels do not have to spend time requesting additions, and HEIs do not have to send supplementary material.

A suggestion for future improvement generated by UKÄ's dialogue with its stakeholders is further to explore the possibility of planning upcoming UKÄ reviews for several years at a time, in dialogue with HEIs. Such a forecasting could assist HEIs in their planning, reduce the risk of colliding reviews, and improve the focus on areas most in need of quality enhancement. Further, UKÄ emphasises the need for dialogue both in the initial phase of reviews when methodologies can be adjusted to fit the case under review, and after reviews when results need implementation at the HEIs.

Supporting documents

1 [Ordinance with instructions for the Swedish Higher Education Authority \(2012:810\)](#) (in Swedish. A non-official English translation is available)

2 Public service agreement for 2025 for the Swedish Higher Education Authority (in Swedish)

5 National quality assurance framework – to strengthen the quality of higher education and research (draft in Swedish)⁴⁴

11 Improving quality – a developed methodology for UKÄ's reviews, 2024 (in English)

12 Evaluation of the national system for quality assurance in higher education. Analysis of the current cycle: 2017–2022, Faugert/Technopolis Group, 2020 (in Swedish)⁴⁵

14 Agency Analysis of the Swedish Higher Education Authority. Statskontorets myndighetsanalys (2024:2)⁴⁶

27 Guidelines for reviewing the HEIs' quality assurance processes for education and research (in English)

28 Guidelines for the evaluation of first and second-cycle programmes (in English)

29 Guidelines for the evaluation of third-cycle programmes (in English)

30 Guidelines for applications for degree-awarding powers (in English)

31 Guidelines for thematic evaluation of widening participation in higher education 2020 (in Swedish)

38 Guidelines for thematic evaluation of nursing education 2022 (in Swedish)

39 Guidelines for thematic evaluation of collaboration with the surrounding community (in English)

40 Impact of evaluations on the administrative burden in the higher education sector (in Swedish)

41 A system review – A summary analysis of the national system for quality assurance 2017–2022 (in English)

⁴⁴ A non-official translated version will be available in English at the site visit.

⁴⁵ A non-official English translation is available.

⁴⁶ A non-official English translation is available.

6.3. ESG Standard 2.3 Implementing processes

Standard

External quality assurance processes should be reliable, useful, pre-defined, implemented consistently and published. They include

- a self-assessment or equivalent;
- an external assessment normally including a site visit;
- a report resulting from the external assessment;
- a consistent follow-up.

Recommendations from the previous review: ‘UKÄ is recommended to establish a pre-defined follow-up mechanism for programmes with a positive assessment in the appraisals of degree awarding powers aiming at supporting these programmes in maintaining high quality.’

‘UKÄ is recommended to more clearly define the follow-up procedures for those institutions and programmes that have received a positive assessment in the institutional reviews and in the programme evaluations.’

EQAR 2021: ‘The Register Committee (...) found that the absence of any standard framework or guidance as to the use of site visits or interviews in thematic evaluations, makes it unclear whether the agency has sufficient approaches to validate the evidences provided by HEIs in this activity. In addition, the panel's report touched only briefly on the suitability of online interviews instead of regular site visits in the activities program [sic] evaluation and appraisal of applications for degree-awarding powers.’

The basic principles and procedures for all UKÄ’s external quality assurance activities are similar, reflecting the interlinked design of the national quality assurance framework. However, there are variations in how the features of the standard apply to the four quality assurance activities, which are explained in this section.

The processes are tested, implemented, evaluated and revised in close dialogue with stakeholders and assessors, as well as between UKÄ’s project managers in the course of coordinated evaluation projects.

6.3.1. Self-assessment

All external quality assurance activities are based on the HEIs’ self-evaluation report. The variations between UKÄ’s external quality assurance activities in purpose, scope, and expected content of self-

evaluation reports are explained in detail for each activity in relevant sections of chapter 5 and 6.

Due to the character of appraisal of applications for degree-awarding powers, the self-assessment in this quality assurance activity is expressed in the HEI's written application, rather than in a self-evaluation report.

In thematic evaluations, the content of the self-evaluation report varies depending on the selected theme and process. For example, in the thematic evaluation of collaboration with the surrounding community, the self-evaluation report consisted of three sections. First, a short description of background and context relevant to the theme and the HEI's approach and activities in the area; second, a set of questions under which the HEI described and reflected on its work and organisation. The third part consisted of a limited number of supplements, illustrating the HEI's activities and organisation on the selected theme. In the thematic evaluation of widening participation in higher education, an advisory group consisting of stakeholders with relevant knowledge and experience suggested what questions HEIs should answer in their self-evaluation report. Similarly, the writing of the self-evaluation report which focused on competence and skills in the thematic evaluation of nursing education was supported by a designated workshop.

6.3.2. External assessment and site visit

Interviews are an integral part of each external quality assurance activity. They may be conducted through regular site visits, as in the case of UKÄ's institutional reviews, or online. In programme evaluations, UKÄ replaced on site visits with online interviews several years before the digital shift during the Covid-19 pandemic, as this was deemed resource efficient and fit for purpose.

Interviews (conducted online) are also integral parts of appraisal of applications for degree-awarding powers, while the methods for thematic evaluations vary with the design of a particular evaluation. For example, in thematic evaluations, site-visits and interviews have been replaced with workshops focussing on dialogue, since this has been deemed to support the developmental focus of the evaluation to a larger degree, and thus be more fit for purpose.

6.3.3. Report

The findings of the assessment are summarised in a report (6.6) written by a group of external experts (6.4), which forms the basis for UKÄ's decision. The assessors' report provides clear guidance for institutional action and quality enhancement, stating how assessment criteria have been evaluated, and highlighting strengths and examples of good practice, as well as challenges and areas of development. The decision and the

report (including the HEI's factual accuracy check) are published together on UKÄ's public website.

In the case of appraisal of applications for degree-awarding powers, the assessment panel's report makes a recommendation to UKÄ as to whether the application should be granted or refused. As for thematic evaluations, the report is in itself a main output, together with the feedback conference, and the assessment panel highlights both strengths and areas for improvement as well as recommendations for the higher education sector as a whole to develop the processes on the specific theme.

6.3.4. Follow-up

For all external quality assurance activities, UKÄ has consistent and quality-enhancing follow-up processes for assessing the action taken by an institution or programme under review. Clear feedback from the initial assessors' report and UKÄ's feedback conferences provide support for HEIs in their efforts to enhance the quality of their programmes or quality assurance processes.

Since the last ENQA review, inspired by the review panel's recommendations, UKÄ has implemented clearer follow-up procedures also for HEIs, programmes and degree-awarding applications that receive a positive assessment. Follow-up procedures for each separate quality assurance activity are described under 6.2 and in UKÄ's guidelines for each activity.

Reflections

Within UKÄ and in dialogue with different stakeholders there is continuous work to make all procedures as efficient as possible while maintaining the quality of the process. It is the general impression from surveys as well as feedback conferences and dialogue meetings that the different external quality assurance activities are considered useful and contribute to quality enhancement at HEIs. Many HEIs state in the surveys that the preparation of the self-evaluation report is the most important part of the assessment process.

An area constantly in focus is how reports can be further improved, and how UKÄ staff best coach assessors into writing clear reports that give useful input to the HEIs (6.4 and 6.6). Efforts have been made to renew the feedback conferences with more focus on follow-up and how HEIs can share actions and improvements resulting from the assessment process. Another topical issue is how to instruct HEIs to provide evidence of their procedures without submitting too much documentation, which is a burden to the HEIs as well as to the assessment panels.

Results (reports and decisions) are made available in different databases that can be reached through the UKÄ external website (6.6). However,

there is an ongoing discussion on how UKÄ can make these tools better known and more user friendly. There is also potential to improve how UKÄ uses its website to provide information on the different external quality assurance activities, and on the results, adjusted to the needs of different stakeholder groups, as well as how to improve the linkage between UKÄ's website and the agency's newsletter. During 2025, a major review of UKÄ's website will take place, with the aim of developing layout and functionality.

Supporting documents

5 National quality assurance framework – to strengthen the quality of higher education and research (draft in Swedish)⁴⁷

9 National framework for quality assurance of higher education. Presentation of a government assignment, UKÄ Report 2016:15 (in English)

11 Improving quality – a developed methodology for UKÄ's reviews, 2024 (in English)

27 Guidelines for reviewing the HEIs' quality assurance processes for education and research (in English)

28 Guidelines for the evaluation of first and second-cycle programmes (in English)

29 Guidelines for the evaluation of third-cycle programmes (in English)

30 Guidelines for applications for degree-awarding powers (in English)

31 Guidelines for thematic evaluation of widening participation in higher education 2020 (in Swedish)

38 Guidelines for thematic evaluation of nursing education 2022 (in Swedish)

39 Guidelines for thematic evaluation of collaboration with the surrounding community 2024 (in English)

⁴⁷ A non-official translated version will be available in English at the site visit.

6.4. ESG Standard 2.4 Peer-review experts

Standard

External quality assurance should be carried out by groups of external experts that include (a) student member(s).

All external quality assurance activities are conducted by external assessment panels, nominated by HEIs and recruited by UKÄ, in accordance with internal guidelines of the agency. The panels consist of experts, plus at least one representative of the labour market, at least one student representative and, in the case of an institutional review including research, one doctoral student. All assessors have the same formal status and participate on equal terms. As mentioned above, assessors are nominated by HEIs, the Swedish Union of Students, and labour market organisations. In addition to these nominations, UKÄ uses recommendations from various networks. The nominated assessors are compared against predetermined criteria covering compulsory knowledge and meritorious expertise, such as having worked with quality assurance activities in an international context. Collectively, the panel is to have sufficiently broad and extensive expertise to assess all aspect areas and perspectives based on the assessment criteria.

6.4.1. Selection of assessors

The careful selection of suitable assessors depends on the review in question. For programme evaluations and appraisal of degree-awarding powers, the most important experience of panel chairs is subject-specific expertise. In institutional reviews, where the focus is on assuring the quality assuring system, the crucial knowledge is instead broad expertise. Regardless of these differences, all panels are composed to provide the best possible fit for the evaluation in question with attention paid also to gender balance and geographical background. International assessors are included as often as possible in all institutional reviews, and in programme evaluations and appraisal of degree-awarding powers, when relevant. These are nominated by HEIs or quality assurance agencies in neighbouring countries or recommended by previous international peer review experts. In the thematic evaluations, different factors are considered in the selection of assessors. The panel of assessors should have subject-specific expertise in the theme that is the focus of the evaluation, and a broad understanding of the higher education and research system. The panels also have student representation and, if necessary, representation from organisations outside academia.

6.4.2. Training of external assessors

Previously, assessors were introduced to the task in an initial meeting at UKÄ's premises during one of the assessment panel meetings that take place in all reviews. To ensure equivalence of training among assessors recruited to conduct different evaluations, and to enhance efficiency and flexibility, UKÄ has recently designed an introductory online course for assessors, implemented as from February 2025. At the time of enrolling in the evaluation, assessors are given access to the course, and they are expected to complete the course before the first meeting with their fellow assessors and UKÄ. This makes them able to participate in review-specific discussions at an earlier point of the process.

The online course introduces assessors to the context of the review, such as the Swedish higher education system and UKÄ's role, as well as specific information such as general timelines and the administrative procedures during the review process. Furthermore, the online course invites the assessors to reflect upon a variety of situations that can occur in reviews. Through the course, assessors are better prepared to understand the published guidelines for the specific external quality assurance activity in which they are to participate.

The need for a common course was identified at a department meeting, which led to the establishment of a working group to develop the course. The working group consisted of representatives from different groups of the Department of Quality Assurance. The primary purpose of having a common course for all assessors is to ensure that all assessors receive the same information, and that UKÄ is able to quality assure the information to make it correct and relevant.

The training of assessors is not completed after the introductory online course. Training is an integrated part of the entire process, since new questions evolve during different parts of the review. The online course is available to the assessment panel during the entire evaluation, enabling them to go back to specific parts, if needed. UKÄ staff guide assessors through all steps during online meetings, site visits, group meetings, and via email and telephone. Since assessors bring different perspectives, the dialogue between assessors and UKÄ's staff members greatly contributes to the agency's continuous internal quality development. As mentioned in 5.6, the introductory online course puts new demands on the role of the project manager, which is why in-house development training through workshops will take place. The complexity of coordinating experts through a peer-review process has also been the topic of a departmental meeting.

6.4.3. Objectivity of assessors

While it is the responsibility of the assessors to provide correct and complete information about possible conflicts of interest, it is the responsibility of UKÄ to inform the assessors about the agency's process

of dealing with the topic. The objectivity of assessors is cared for through determined routines in the recruiting process. At the very onset when experts are nominated, the nominating organisation is asked whether they see any risk of conflict of interest in relation to any of the HEIs about to undergo review. Secondly, when assessors are offered a role on a panel, they are asked about possible conflicts of interest. Thirdly, before a panel is finalised, the HEI to be reviewed is asked whether they object to any of the assessors based on a possible lack of objectivity. As the last step, before finalising the recruitment and signing contracts, assessors must all sign a formal declaration of independence. These measures are in order to apply a precautionary principle, minimising the risk of possible conflicts of interest.

If changes are made to the Swedish Administrative Procedure Act that forms the basis of UKÄ's routines regarding conflict of interest, guidelines are updated accordingly. The latest update was carried out in 2023. To make sure different aspects were considered, the update process involved UKÄ's strategist, staff at the Department of Quality Assurance and at the Department of Legal Affairs.

Reflections

UKÄ spends considerable effort to make the assessment panels as fit as possible for every individual review. In projects concerning programme evaluations and appraisal of degree-awarding powers, the responsible project manager at UKÄ organises the assessment panel. Since institutional reviews are planned up to a few years in advance, and since these reviews can demand larger panels, a working group has been given the task to handle the nomination process and suggest panels to the project managers. These different methods could be more integrated to lessen the burden for the HEIs, which are asked to nominate to various reviews, and for UKÄ staff. For example, there are plans for recruitment documents to be shared among the groups of the Department of Quality Assurance, creating an inventory of possible assessors for upcoming reviews. Such a solution will require new ways of communication with the HEIs, in order not to put the nomination procedure in which HEIs have a say at risk.

Although the nominated experts live up to high standards, UKÄ and HEIs would benefit from having more nominations for the appraisal of degree-awarding powers. There are more nominations for institutional reviews and programme evaluations possibly because the HEIs see the benefits of developing the skills of their staff, with all HEIs undergoing regular reviews. There are signs that the information about upcoming reviews does not reach interested experts in a satisfactory way. Information campaigns in external channels could be helpful to attract experts and lead to more nominations.

UKÄ has also identified the need for more dialogue with HEIs regarding nomination procedures. The results from calls for nominations have been

found to vary according to HEIs' internal ways of processing the issue. It would be beneficial with a more even and systematic response, since this would contribute to a broader pool of assessors.

Supporting documents

22 Guidelines for managing irregularities, representation, conflicts of interest, and secondary employment (Internal document in Swedish)

23 Disclosure of conflict of interest in assignments for the Swedish Higher Education Authority (Internal document in Swedish)

27 Guidelines for reviewing the HEIs' quality assurance processes for education and research (in English)

28 Guidelines for the evaluation of first and second-cycle programmes (in English)

29 Guidelines for the evaluation of third-cycle programmes (in English)

30 Guidelines for applications for degree-awarding powers (in English)

33 Administrative Procedure Act (2017:900) (non-official translation in English)

6.5. ESG Standard 2.5 Criteria for outcomes

Standard:

Any outcomes or judgements made as the result of external quality assurance should be based on explicit and published criteria that are applied consistently, irrespective of whether the process leads to a formal decision.

6.5.1. Pre-defined and published assessment criteria - basis for determining outcomes

The assessment criteria for an individual external quality assurance activity are expressed in the guidelines for the activity, that is, the guidelines for institutional reviews, programme evaluations, appraisal for degree-awarding powers, or thematic evaluations. The guidelines for each external quality assurance activity are published on UKÄ's website⁴⁸ and communicated to HEIs and assessors. Each guideline also includes explanations of purpose, focus, and the main principles for the activity, alongside other necessary information. For example, in the guidelines for

⁴⁸ https://www.uka.se/swedish-higher-education-authority/for-higher-education-institutions/guidelines-and-templates?plusbox=12_3275c80e18529ebcf50b8b4 (in English)

programme evaluations and thematic evaluations, the assessment criteria are supplemented by evaluation questions or equivalent to make it easier for the HEI to describe, analyse, and evaluate how an assessment criterion is fulfilled using concrete examples. In the guideline for appraisal of applications for degree-awarding powers, each assessment criterion is followed by guidelines for the application of what is to be included for each criterion. As such, the guidelines provide support for the HEI in how they are to demonstrate the fulfilment of the criteria in their self-evaluation report, as well as support for the assessment panels to be consistent in their analysis. The basis for the assessment panel's judgements in each external quality assurance activity is described in 6.2 and related subsections.

Institutional reviews focus on whether the HEI's quality assurance processes contribute to ensuring and developing the quality of education and research in a systematic and appropriate manner. The HEI must be able to demonstrate that it organises its internal quality assurance processes and applies its quality system⁴⁹ in an effective manner, and that the HEI makes changes to aspects that do not work effectively. The assessment is based on the following information: a self-evaluation report from the HEI, including annexes; a student report from the students' and doctoral students' unions; information from interviews; and documentation from selected audit trails (6.2.1). The assessment panel uses eight assessment criteria each in their review of the HEI's internal quality assurance processes for education and research respectively (16 in total). Some of the assessment criteria are similarly expressed, thus enabling the HEI to reflect upon the efficiency of their internal quality assurance activities in a coherent manner. The assessment criteria for the institutional reviews of research cover the following areas: established procedure and quality culture; continuous monitoring; periodic reviews; research development and renewal; support activities and research infrastructure; competence supply, professional development and career support; gender equality; and good research practice. The assessment criteria for the institutional reviews of education cover: established procedure and quality culture; continuous monitoring; periodic reviews; establishment and discontinuation; student support, learning resources and infrastructure; competence supply and professional development; connection between research and education; and student-centred learning. The assessment panel evaluates how well the HEI's quality assurance processes are described, motivated and work in practice.

The emphasis of a **programme evaluation** is on the actual conditions and results of the programme. An assessment is made of how the programme is designed, implemented, and examined to ensure that students have

⁴⁹ The term quality system, which is used in UKÄ's review, refers to the systematic nature of the HEIs' quality assurance processes, i.e. the structure or framework that the HEI has for its internal quality assurance processes. The quality system includes both the documented conditions, in the form of organisation, distribution of responsibilities and policy documents, and the procedures and working methods used to work with both quality assurance and quality development.

every opportunity to achieve the qualitative targets (3.1.1). The evaluation also assesses whether the programme provides the preconditions to ensure goal attainment. The assessment criteria for evaluation of first- and second-cycle programmes are focused on staff resources and goal attainment. In its self-evaluation report the HEI shall describe, analyse, and evaluate the teaching expertise and capacity that students encounter in teaching, supervision, and examinations during the programme, as well as the assurance that the students meet goal attainment for the qualitative targets for each outcome. The specific qualitative targets included in a specific programme evaluation are chosen in dialogue with representatives from HEIs, students, and the labour market, enabling the evaluation to be as knowledge-based and resource-efficient as possible. The basis for assessment of first- and second-cycle programmes is the HEI's self-evaluation report with appendices, first- and second-cycle degree projects or equivalent documentation, interviews with representatives of the evaluated programme and with students. The basis for assessment of third-cycle programmes is the self-evaluation report with annexes, the general study plan for the third-cycle subject, randomly selected individual study plans and interviews with representatives of the reviewed programme and doctoral students. All assessment materials for the evaluation are to be weighed together. (6.2.2). The assessment criteria for evaluation of third-cycle programmes also include the assessment of the third-cycle programme environment in addition to assessment of staff resources and target attainment. For evaluations of third-cycle programmes, the qualitative targets assessed are also set by the guideline.

The purpose of the **appraisal of applications for degree-awarding powers** is to examine whether an HEI meets the necessary prerequisites for students or doctoral students to achieve the qualitative targets for the degree to which the educational programme should lead (6.2.3). The assessment of the application for degree-awarding powers is made on the basis of the following assessment criteria: degree/field of study/main field of study; staff; educational environment; resources; policy documents; and goal attainment. In the application, which corresponds to a self-evaluation report, the HEI describes how the assessment criteria are met. As support, each assessment criterion is followed by guidelines for the application on what should be included.

The methodology applied to **thematic evaluations** is developed and adopted to the relevant theme. The methods used for the other external quality assurance activities are followed whenever possible. The criteria to be met in the thematic evaluation are based on what emerges as most relevant to examine for the chosen theme and are decided during the methodology development process. UKÄ employs no generic assessment criteria in thematic evaluations since it wants to ensure maximum benefit. Such a standpoint was suggested as a possible development of the process by the panel of the previous ENQA review. The description of the evaluation process and the assessment criteria are set out in the guidelines

for the specific thematic evaluation, which is published and made available to HEIs before the evaluation starts (6.2.4).

Applicable to all external quality assurance activities is that, regardless of the criteria or whether the panel has reached a positive or negative outcome, the panels must be able to justify their findings based on the assessment material. In the report, they must clearly explain how each criterion was assessed, and how they have reached their final overall assessment.

6.5.2. Support to assessment panels to ensure consistent and transparent assessments

UKÄ has set up internal quality assurance processes to support and ensure that the assessment panels interpret the assessment criteria consistently between reviews and justify and clearly explain their assessment in their report. At the start of an assessment process, the assessment panel is introduced to the process and methodology of the quality assurance activity. This includes information about the specific external quality assurance activity and the criteria to be assessed. As described in section 6.4 this is done via an introductory online course since spring 2025.

Throughout the external quality assurance process, UKÄ's project managers support the assessment panels in different stages of the process. There is an internal digital project manager support for each quality assurance activity (institutional reviews, programme evaluations, and appraisal of applications for degree-awarding powers), consisting of steering documents and guidelines as well as descriptions of the review methodology, the various stages of the process, and suggestions for working methods. The support material is updated as needed, and in line with the findings of the reviews and the process coordination and internal meetings of the group. The primary objectives of the support are to make sure that all assessment criteria are assessed, explained, and justified, and that the assessors follow the guidelines in general.

Reflections

As previously described, the national framework for quality assurance has undergone a thorough overview. One result of this process is the revised assessment criteria of the external quality assurance activities.

A challenge during the method development process has been to strike a balance between, on the one hand, finding assessment criteria general enough to allow application to HEIs of different types and, on the other hand, making them clear (detailed) enough to assessors and HEIs to ensure predictability and equivalence. With the aim of reducing previous overlaps, the assessment criteria for **institutional reviews** have become more clearly delimited, which will facilitate descriptions and assessment of the HEIs' own conditions and structures in a coherent manner. In this

way, institutional reviews will better address the effectiveness of HEIs internal quality assurance processes.

The number of assessment criteria for **programme evaluations** have been reduced to better focus on areas where the need for improvement and enhancement is deemed greatest. They are now mainly focused on staff resources and ensuring students' goal attainment. For doctoral programmes, there is also the assessment criterion of educational environment. Each evaluation is adapted to be as accurate and quality-enhancing as possible by conducting a pre-study of the programme and enabling a dialogue with the HEIs before the evaluation.

The requirement for the application to be complete before an assessment panel is appointed has been strengthened in the **appraisal of applications for degree-awarding powers**. The overall requirements for the application have also been tightened in that all assessment criteria must now be met for the application to be approved. There are also increased requirements on HEIs, for example, to justify the need for the programme in question and to report resources and intended collaborations.

Since the different revised external quality assurance processes are currently being implemented, it is too early to conclude whether the revised criteria are clear enough or if further adjustments will be needed.

The revised criteria may also affect how well UKÄ staff will be able to support the assessment panels in their assessments in a consistent manner. The internal project manager support material and the internal quality assurance processes with a continuously monitored and updated support may therefore be of importance. If necessary, the understanding of the revised assessment criteria may become a recurrent topic of discussion for the different groups within the Department of Quality Assurance. There is also a planned in-house training that will address the new role of the project manager expected due to the development and implementation of expert training courses for assessors. Instead of guiding them through the guidelines at the first meeting, the project manager will have a different role, as described in 5.6.

The outcomes from UKÄ's four external quality assurance activities, including follow-ups, for 2020 – 2024 are shown in Table 1 (5.1).

Supporting documents

27 [Guidelines for reviewing the HEIs' quality assurance processes for education and research](#) (in English)

28 [Guidelines for the evaluation of first and second-cycle programmes](#) (in English)

29 [Guidelines for the evaluation of third-cycle programmes](#) (in English)

6.6. ESG Standard 2.6 Reporting

Standard

Full reports by the experts should be published, clear and accessible to the academic community, external partners and other interested individuals. If the agency takes any formal decision based on the reports, the decision should be published together with the report.

Each of UKÄ's external quality assurance activities results in an assessment panel's report and a formal decision or recommendation made by UKÄ. For institutional reviews, as there are separate sets of assessment criteria for the quality assurance of education and research (6.5.1), UKÄ makes separate decisions for the quality assurance processes for education and research, based on two separate reports from the assessors (6.2.1).

All assessment panels' reports are published in an open database accessible on UKÄ's website,⁵⁰ together with the decision (positive as well as negative outcomes) or recommendation by UKÄ, and the HEI's self-evaluation report or application, usually the day after the decision is made by UKÄ. The database also allows searchable comparison between assessments for different reviews and evaluations.

An assessment panel's report includes assessments of the HEI's fulfilment of each assessment criteria, and an overall assessment. In addition to the assessments, the reports contain certain annexes, the number and character of which depend on the external quality assurance activity.

The panels' conclusions must be based on the evidence provided, and clearly connected to the assessment criteria. For the reports to be useful to the HEI, regardless of a positive or negative outcome of the assessment, the panels are also expected to include their own reflections and to highlight the HEI's strengths and areas in need of improvement, as well as examples of good practice.

The assessment panel's report draft is sent to the HEI for a factual accuracy check before UKÄ makes its final decision. The HEI's written response is included with the panel's report when published.

⁵⁰ Högskolekollen, <https://www.uka.se/vara-resultat/hogskolekollen> (in Swedish)

Reflections

As UKÄ's external quality assurance activities are based on peer-review processes, the responsibility for making assessments and writing the reports lies with the assessment panel. The panel's ownership of their report is an important principle. This may, however, create challenges for UKÄ in the quality assurance of the reports. UKÄ must make sure that each report covers all assessment criteria, and that it is written in a clear and concise language. For this reason, efforts to ensure the quality of the report begin early in the process with the training of assessors (6.4), and continue with the review of the preliminary and final reports. The process takes considerable time and effort for UKÄ staff, as well as for the assessors. Issues such as consistency and equity of assessment as well as the language and structure of reports are discussed continuously within the Department of Quality Assurance, with the aim of sharing good practice and promote high quality. The effort of preparing high quality reports must be balanced against their perceived benefits and timeliness. Hence, reports from UKÄ's external quality assurance activities are complemented by other methods of communicating results and providing feedback to HEIs, such as thematic analyses, conferences, and workshops.

At present, only a few programme evaluations have been conducted in English and had their reports published, and none since the last ENQA review. In addition, the open database used for publishing results is currently available only in Swedish. An area of development for UKÄ to consider is therefore what information from reviews and evaluations could be provided in English, for example, as summaries. At the same time, being a public body, UKÄ must abide by the Swedish Language Act.⁵¹ Should it become legally possible for UKÄ to engage in cross-border quality assurance, for instance, the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, the agency may need to explore new modes of communicating results in English, including the potential use of artificial intelligence.

Supporting documents

5 National quality assurance framework – to strengthen the quality of higher education and research (draft in Swedish)⁵²

11 Improving quality – a developed methodology for UKÄ's reviews, 2024 (in English)

⁵¹ Språklag 2009:600, <https://www.regeringen.se/contentassets/36dc86bb939c4bc79eb44417b0852b40/spraklag-pa-engelska/> (in English)

⁵² A non-official translated version will be available in English at the site visit.

27 Guidelines for reviewing the HEIs' quality assurance processes for education and research (in English)

28 Guidelines for the evaluation of first and second-cycle programmes (in English)

29 Guidelines for the evaluation of third-cycle programmes (in English)

30 Guidelines for applications for degree-awarding powers (in English)

31 Guidelines for thematic evaluation of widening participation in higher education 2020 (in Swedish)

38 Guidelines for thematic evaluation of nursing education 2022 (in Swedish)

39 Guidelines for thematic evaluation of collaboration with the surrounding community 2024 (in English)

6.7. ESG Standard 2.7 Complaints and appeals

Standard

Complaints and appeals processes should be clearly defined as part of the design of external quality assurance processes and communicated to the institutions.

Recommendations from the previous review: 'The panel recommends the agency to establish a complaints procedure. The procedure should be made known to all concerned parties.'

'The panel recommends extending the powers of the appeals committee to make recommendations to UKÄ on how to correct errors in quality assurance procedures that potentially can have affected the assessment outcome.'

EQAR 2021: 'The analysis of the panel showed that UKÄ has no formal complaints procedure in place, even though the panel was confident that any issues stakeholders have, related to the work of the agency, are taken up by UKÄ. The report further discussed the advisory role of the appeals committee and the panel was concerned that this approach, paired with the fact that the committee cannot make recommendations how to correct potential errors, could undermine the authority of the appeals committee.'

6.7.1. Appeals

UKÄ has extended the powers of its appeals committee (the external expert group referred to below) by giving them the opportunity to make recommendations in the final stage of their review of the appealed process. The extension of the appeals committee's mandate is described in the revised Guidelines for the reassessment of decisions within external quality assurance of higher education.

The Administrative Procedure Act (2017:900) states that when a decision made by a government agency is manifestly wrong in some essential respect due to new circumstances, or for some other reason, it should be altered, provided that this can be done rapidly, easily and without detriment to any private party.

HEIs involved in reviews within any of the four types of external quality assurance activities conducted by UKÄ can appeal by requesting a review of UKÄ's decision. If an HEI requests an appeal, UKÄ recruits an external expert group to examine whether there were deficiencies in the previous review or evaluation process. Following a call for nominations to the HEIs, the expert group is set up on selection criteria that they collectively have

- good knowledge of Swedish higher education
- experience of conducting and participating in evaluations and reviews in the higher education sector in Sweden or in other countries
- experience of quality work within an HEI
- experience of management work in the higher education sector
- relevant legal training or competence.

Members of the expert group should not have participated in the process leading up to the decision under review, and they should not be a member of any of UKÄ's advisory or reference groups. The work of the expert group is supported by UKÄ staff, who, likewise, must not have participated in the preceding review process.

With the external expert group in place, UKÄ informs the HEI about the suggested assessors in order to investigate possible conflicts of interest. If accepted, the expert group reviews the request. They may, if necessary, interview representatives of the HEI or request supplementary documentation. The expert group thereafter reports its review in a statement to UKÄ's Director General. The statement describes whether the expert group considers the previous review or evaluation process deficient. If that is the case, the group must assess whether the detected deficiencies may have affected the decision. The expert group may also make recommendations on the further handling of the case.

Based on the expert group's findings, UKÄ assesses the possible deficiencies. In the event that it concludes no errors have been made, UKÄ takes a position on the requested reconsideration based on existing

documentation. If it finds that there are documented deficiencies that may have affected previous decisions, UKÄ considers the expert group's recommendations and takes measures to address them. For example, UKÄ may decide that all or part of the original assessment panel should be called together for a renewed assessment.

Information about the appeals procedure is available at UKÄ's external website. Since the last review of UKÄ in 2020, no HEI has made a request for a decision to be reviewed through the appeal procedure.

6.7.2. Complaints

In the previous ENQA agency review, UKÄ was recommended to establish a complaints procedure and to make it known to all concerned parties.

The Swedish public management culture is heavily dependent on trust between authorities and trust that the public authorities operate in accordance with national laws and regulations. Citizens are recommended to resolve problems in direct contact with authorities, and any request, including complaints, from the public to a government agency must be processed swiftly. Since HEIs have a long and documented trust in UKÄ's ability to handle individual complaints directly, and other possible ways of launching complaints exist, such as external whistleblower functions and complaints to the Parliamentary Ombudsmen (JO), UKÄ was confident the existing complaints procedure was in accordance with the standard.

Nevertheless, in its previous review of UKÄ, while recognising stakeholders' trust that any complaints would be properly processed by UKÄ, ENQA found that, given the structure of UKÄ with clear decision-making structures, it was indispensable for UKÄ to develop a formal complaints procedure to allow HEIs to state their dissatisfaction with the review process or with agency staff. To meet this requirement and further improve the opportunity to bring together comments from HEIs, UKÄ has since set up a formal procedure for complaints, supported by an internal guideline (see 5.6 for more information about guidelines). Complaints are filed via the vice-chancellor of the HEI. The internal guideline states that when a complaint is filed, the registrar forwards the complaint received to the head of the Department of Quality Assurance, who is responsible for ensuring that the complaints are processed, documented, and responded to promptly. In cases where complaints regard the head of the Department of Quality Assurance, complaints are handled by the Director General.

UKÄ has made the complaints procedure known through various channels, such as open information meetings for HEIs, conferences, newsletters, and instructions on the external website. Information about

the complaints procedure is also included, in Swedish and in English, in the guidelines for all HEIs undergoing any type of review.

Since the establishment of the complaints procedure in autumn 2024, no complaints have been filed.

Reflections

UKÄ strives for openness and dialogue in its quality assurance activities and maintains the processes of ensuring the quality of decisions, such as allowing HEIs to nominate assessors and sharing preliminary judgements with the HEI, allowing the opportunity to submit comments before UKÄ makes its decision. These routines correlate with UKÄ's well-established approach based on trust and dialogue. Nevertheless, clear and communicated guidelines for both complaints and appeals further strengthen the agency's relations with the HEIs and the transparency of its activities.

Supporting documents

42 Guidelines for the reassessment of decisions within external quality assurance of higher education (in Swedish)

43 Guidelines for handling complaints regarding the external quality assurance of higher education institutions (internal document in Swedish)

7. Opinions of stakeholders

UKÄ's main stakeholders are HEIs, students, the labour market, the Government and other decision-makers on national, regional or local level. HEIs, students' unions, and labour market organisations are all closely involved in UKÄ's external quality assurance activities, for instance, as experts in assessment panels, and throughout the assessment process through HEIs' self-evaluation reports and interviews (including student and labour market representatives).

In addition, stakeholders contribute in a number of ways to improving the design of UKÄ's external quality assurance activities, and they are active also after the assessment process, for example, by providing feedback in surveys and in follow-up and feedback conferences organised by UKÄ. The agency works continuously to develop the forms for active stakeholder involvement before, during and after its external quality assurance activities. This ensures that UKÄ's assessment processes are timely and fit for purpose. Feedback and opinions from stakeholders reach UKÄ directly through the above-mentioned communication channels, through UKÄ's reference groups, and from continuous dialogue between UKÄ and stakeholders; more indirect feedback is provided by public debate over various quality aspects of higher education in Sweden.

7.1. Stakeholder survey 2024

In an attempt to gather substantial evidence of stakeholder views on UKÄ and the quality and consistency of the agency's services, an external stakeholder survey was carried out in the autumn 2024. The survey was conducted by an external independent company and included interviews of 25 stakeholders representing the Government, HEIs, the Swedish National Union of students, as well as other national and international organisations or authorities. The main findings are summarised below.

In general, the stakeholders have a positive view of UKÄ as an expert authority. UKÄ is perceived as a credible and competent agency both nationally and internationally. The stakeholders emphasise UKÄ's important role in quality assurance and its ability to drive and promote quality development through dialogue.

Stakeholders see clear benefits with UKÄ's operations for the development of the higher education sector. UKÄ's work on creating a common national standard for educational quality is considered one of the greatest benefits. The external quality assurance activities help HEIs to identify areas for improvement and promote a culture of continuous improvement.

UKÄ is considered an important source of knowledge, particularly in education-related issues. However, some stakeholders consider UKÄ's role in the field of research less prominent, and hold the view that the accessibility of information on the website could be improved.

Despite the overall positive view of UKÄ, stakeholders see a potential for improvement regarding the website and assessment panels. Several stakeholders mention problems navigating the UKÄ website and request better accessibility to information. There is also a call for better calibration between assessment panels to ensure equivalent and fair assessments. Moreover, the stakeholders feel that the administrative workload is high, especially for smaller HEIs, and express a desire for simplified processes and better planning to reduce the burden. Some of the organisations interviewed wish that UKÄ could be more responsive to their views.

Finally, the stakeholders raise the issue of balance between UKÄ's independence and government mandates. Stakeholders are concerned that UKÄ's independence may be negatively affected by too many detail-driven government assignments, which may limit UKÄ's ability to initiate its own sector-enhancement projects. However, most of the stakeholders believe that UKÄ handles this well.

7.2. Reference groups and dialogue

The picture of UKÄ reflected in the stakeholder survey referred to above is consistent with the feedback the agency receives continuously through various reference groups, and through the Director General's contacts with vice-chancellors and the Government. Above all, the dialogue-based and transparent approach applied in the enhancement and implementation of the current national framework for quality assurance, as well as in the agency's operations as a whole, is highly appreciated by stakeholders and is considered an important enhancement of the relationship between UKÄ and other actors in the higher education sector in Sweden (also see the SWOT analysis in chapter 9).

Reflections

Overall, the results of the stakeholder survey were unsurprising. As described in previous sections, the fact that the national quality assurance framework was complex and placed a high administrative burden on HEIs was the point of departure for the recent revision of the agency's methodology (6.2). However, it is too early to determine whether the changes introduced have yielded the desired results, for example, in terms of reduced administrative burden.

As commented by several stakeholders in the stakeholder survey, the agency has also reflected on the risks of a growing number of government

assignments. In a recent report to the Government, UKÄ concludes that the burden can be decreased if the agency is allowed greater freedom to adapt the method in accordance with the timeframe and the purpose. It is also proposed that the Government could review the number of assignments given to UKÄ, and coordinate between ministries and government inquiries in order to reduce the volume of government assignments, with a particular focus on assignments that burden the same educational departments and organisational units at the HEIs.

UKÄ strives to improve its operations, and stakeholders' opinions are important in this respect. For example, the recent stakeholder survey showed opportunities for improvement linked to the agency's website. Since the launch of the new website in 2023, improvement measures have been implemented to facilitate navigation. In early 2025, an internal project was launched to take a holistic approach to its development.

Another way of demonstrating how the agency deals with suggestions for improvement is, for example, the views expressed by the Swedish National Union of Students. Both the stakeholder survey and the Swedish Agency for Public Management's (Statskontoret) report state that the agency could be more responsive to the student union views. As a result, UKÄ has intensified its dialogue with the Swedish National Union of Students and is preparing an annual Student Union Day. A revision of the information material on the national quality assurance framework aimed at students is also in progress.

Supporting documents

14 [Agency Analysis of the Swedish Higher Education Authority, Statskontorets myndighetsanalys \(2024:2\)](#): a non-official English translation is available

40 [Impact of evaluations on the administrative burden in the higher education sector](#) (in Swedish)

44 [Report Stakeholder survey 2024](#) (internal document in Swedish; a non-official English translation is available)

8. Recommendations and main findings from the previous review and UKÄ's resulting follow-up

ENQA's recommendations

The ENQA Board, in its decision on 16 December 2020, recommended UKÄ to take appropriate action, so far as the agency was empowered to do so, on the following issues:

ESG 3.3 Independence

Recommendation from the previous review

'UKÄ is recommended to take measures to further safeguard its capacity to independently design its methodologies in external quality assurance.'

UKÄ's organisational independence, operational independence, and independence of formal outcomes are explained in 5.3 above and underpin the design and implementation of the national quality assurance framework, as described throughout this self-assessment report. The independence of Swedish government agencies such as UKÄ is formally safeguarded through national legislation. Importantly, neither the Riksdag nor the Government or other authorities may interfere with UKÄ's decision-making, according to the Instrument of Government (the Swedish Constitution). In another direction, UKÄ's independence towards the HEIs is safeguarded through the fact that there are no financial ties between UKÄ and the HEIs, and no fees are connected to UKÄ's external quality assurance activities.

The recent revision of the national quality assurance framework, with its processes, procedures and criteria (6.2 and 6.5), is a clear example of how UKÄ operates and makes decisions independently, while in close dialogue with its stakeholders.

No formal changes in UKÄ's legal or organisational status have occurred since the last review, and no changes are foreseen, to the knowledge of the agency. Judging from UKÄ's dialogue with the higher education sector and the recent stakeholder survey (7.1), UKÄ's stakeholders find these arrangements on the whole satisfactory. However, as pointed out in 5.3, other aspects of the independence of UKÄ remain an important area

to safeguard, such as the increasing number of government assignments that might challenge the general operational independence of the agency.

ESG 2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose

Recommendation from the previous review

‘UKÄ is recommended to go further in reducing the HEIs’ workload in its quality assurance activities. In doing so, UKÄ should consider to which extent the different activities can be integrated or complement each other better.’

The previous panel’s analysis and recommendation, as well as the findings of an independent external evaluation of the national quality assurance framework and extensive dialogue with HEIs and other stakeholders, have informed UKÄ’s further development work and the revision of the quality assurance activities during 2021 – 2024.

A guiding principle in the revision of UKÄ’s quality assurance methodologies has been to make external quality assurance more accurate, flexible and resource-efficient. An important overarching aim of the revised method has therefore been to develop UKÄ’s reviews and evaluations based on the experiences of the 2017 – 2022 cycle, to make sure they are both resource-efficient and drivers for quality enhancement. Also, HEIs have developed more mature quality systems and should be able to take greater responsibility for the quality assurance of their activities.

UKÄ is convinced that the revision of the national quality assurance framework described in this report, which aims at more integrated and complementary quality assurance activities, will reduce the HEIs’ workload and substantially remove overlap between activities, and maximise accuracy, impact, and quality enhancement. UKÄ is also well aware that in a rapidly changing higher education landscape, the national quality assurance framework needs to develop continuously in order for it to stay relevant and contribute to the further enhancement of quality and promotion of excellence in Swedish higher education.

The revised methodology is explained in detail under 5.1 and 6.2, as well as in other sections of the report where specific standards have been affected to some degree by the recent revision of UKÄ’s external quality assurance processes.⁵³

⁵³ Cf. Follow-up report. [The Swedish Higher Education Authority's \(UKÄ\) response to ENQA's recommendations](#), Swedish Higher Education Authority 2023 (in English)

ESG 2.3 Implementing processes

Recommendations from the previous review

‘UKÄ is recommended to establish a pre-defined follow-up mechanism for programmes with a positive assessment in the appraisals of degree awarding powers aiming at supporting these programmes in maintaining high quality.’

‘UKÄ is recommended to more clearly define the follow-up procedures for those institutions and programmes that have received a positive assessment in the institutional reviews and in the programme evaluations.’

As a result of the recent revision of the national quality assurance framework, UKÄ has reinforced a number of follow-up mechanisms, in line with the recommendations of the previous ENQA panel. With regard to the recommendation of establishing a pre-defined follow-up mechanism for programmes with a positive assessment in the **appraisal of applications for degree awarding powers**, UKÄ’s recently implemented follow-up procedure, described in 6.2.3, is conducted in two steps: first, data is collected on how the degree-awarding powers are used by the HEI; second, a dialogue is organised with the managers of the new education programme; finally, the results from data collection and dialogue are published in a report.

In the case of **institutional reviews**, HEIs whose quality assurance processes were approved in the initial review are followed up via a dialogue approximately one year after UKÄ’s decision. Another new element is that an HEI assessed as having approved quality assurance processes with reservations is to report the measures it has taken no later than two years after the initial review decision. For an HEI given the assessment quality assurance processes under review, the HEI and UKÄ agree on an appropriate date for reporting what measures have been taken.

As for the follow-up of programmes having received a positive assessment in a **programme evaluation**, all programme evaluations involve a final opportunity for dialogue between those involved in the evaluation, for the sharing of lessons learned, development needs, and examples of good practice.

The changes in follow-up procedures, responding to recommendations from the last ENQA review and resulting from UKÄ’s further development work, are described in more detail for each quality assurance activity in 6.2, 6.3, and in the guidelines.

ESG 2.7 Complaints and appeals

Recommendations from the previous review

‘The agency is recommended to establish a complaints procedure. The procedure should be made known to all concerned parties.’

‘The agency is recommended to extend the powers of the appeals committee to make recommendations to UKÄ on how to correct errors in quality assurance procedures that potentially can have affected the assessment outcome.’

Complaints

UKÄ strives for openness and dialogue in its quality assurance activities. In UKÄ’s reviews and evaluations, processes are in place to ensure the quality of its decisions. HEIs may, for example, nominate assessors and comment on the composition of UKÄ’s assessment panels. Preliminary judgements are also shared with the HEI, which is given the opportunity to submit comments before UKÄ makes its decision.

In case they are dissatisfied with the review process, HEIs that undergo UKÄ’s external quality assurance have the opportunity to register a complaint. Complaints may concern the process of UKÄ’s reviews or those who carried out the review, and may be submitted by the vice-chancellor via e-mail to the agency. Complaints received are promptly processed.

The complaints procedure clarifies the legal obligation for government agencies such as UKÄ to respond promptly to any request made.

Appeals

As noted by the previous ENQA expert panel, UKÄ’s appeals procedure is clear and well known to all parties concerned, and apply to all four types of external quality assurance activities of the national framework.

Following the expert panel’s recommendation, UKÄ extended the powers of the appeals committee to make recommendations on how to correct errors in quality assurance procedures that potentially may have affected the assessment outcome. This extension of the appeals committee’s mandate is described in the revised Guidelines for the reassessment of decisions within external quality assurance of higher education, published on the UKÄ website.

UKÄ’s revised complaints and appeals procedures are described in further detail in 6.7. Information on complaints and appeals within quality assurance is available on the UKÄ website, where other more general ways to complain about the conduct of a public agency are also described.

9. SWOT analysis

A number of SWOT analysis exercises were held with internal and external groups as part of the SAR process. This includes UKÄ’s two national stakeholder reference groups, the Advisory Council, the management team, and staff within the Department of Quality Assurance.

Table 7 summarises the results.

Table 7. UKÄ’s SWOT analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses
Staff have a high level of expertise and extensive knowledge of the HEI sector	New methods and processes are untested or only partially tested
Strong loyalty to the task among staff	High staff turnover in parts of the organisation
Robust core operations	Difficulties ensuring knowledge transfer between employees, groups and departments
Reliable statistical production and recurring analyses	Limited focus on and competence in the fields of research and collaboration with the wider community
Professional organisation with skilled and dedicated staff	Apprehensiveness (fear of making mistakes)
A knowledge-based and dialogue-oriented approach enabling evaluations and thematic assessments and a proactive approach to the government	Trust-building journey between the new management team and staff
Established legitimate methods and assessment criteria	Lack of evaluation of internal operations and work environment challenges
High-quality assessment groups and peer review method	Bureaucratic delays due to departments waiting for one another
Good communication and strong dialogue with the higher education sector, fostering trust and legitimacy.	The gap between the Department for Operational Support and other departments, as identified in the report from The Swedish Agency for Public Management. The Department for Operational Support is under development.
In most cases, we carry out a preliminary study in our work before starting the actual assessment. This helps our project managers, as well as UKÄ staff to be better prepared for the assessment process.	The student report could be more focused and better targeted to reflect students’ actual situations
Coordination and support promote greater consistency across evaluations	New management team – lack of experience
Stable national quality assurance framework and structured working methods	Not enough reviews of the agency’s own operations
Inclusive approach involving HEIs, students, researchers, and administrative staff	Heavy workload due to numerous extensive reviews and assignments
Strong reputation with high trust from HEIs and government stakeholders	Resource limitations within UKÄ and HEIs, leading to overburdening of institutions
Already proven good enough to be a member of ENQA and continued to develop since the last ENQA review	Balancing control and development promotion is challenging

Clear role and position within the higher education system with a structured and systematic working approach	Limited and shallow understanding of the ESG and ENQA requirements among staff
Working across UKÄ groups and departments is a strength, as is the ambition to refine the work with thematic analyses	Institutional autonomy poses challenges in some contexts
Ability to contribute to the qualitative development of HEIs through thematic analyses and best practice	How do we ensure that smaller HEIs take responsibility for their quality assurance?
Significant inclusion of the student perspective	Use of assessment panels – cumbersome process?
New management team fostering renewal and innovation	Difficulty finding qualified assessors
	Expectations from policymakers do not always align with UKÄ's actual influence
	Historically tight staffing levels and a period of instability within the agency
	Lengthy processes leading to procedural fatigue
	Legitimacy? Relationship with SUHF
	Mandate in certain contexts; institutional autonomy can pose challenges

Opportunities	Threats
High level of trust within the sector and strong confidence among stakeholders	Potential loss of trust from the higher education sector
Increased dialogue with the higher education sector	Government control, a Director General appointed by the government, political influence over UKÄ operations
Method development aligned with the ESG and opportunities for increased international engagement	Funding uncertainties and economic constraints
Responsibility for national statistics provides the opportunity to conduct analyses that no other organisation in Sweden can perform	Staff turnover and challenges in recruiting and retaining talent
New management team	Growing administrative burden on HEIs leading to evaluation fatigue
Improved dialogue and collaboration across UKÄ departments	Bureaucratic inefficiencies and micromanagement of agency functions
Expanded use of high-quality data for deeper insights and reports	The agency's communications operations
Highly-qualified assessment panels and a new assessor introduction format to improve review quality even further	Increasing difficulty in detecting cheating, including AI-related challenges
Cross-departmental collaboration to strengthen institutional reviews and programme evaluations. The opportunity to collaborate more across departmental boundaries. How can UKÄ's Department of Quality Assurance benefit from its closeness and many collaborations with especially the Department of Higher Education Analysis, but also the Department of Legal Affairs and the Department for Operational Support	Risk of evaluations becoming detached from the daily realities of research and teaching
	Micromanagement of teacher education: what if it spreads?
	Lack of knowledge in the sector
	Lack of physical meetings with assessors and HEIs: this could weaken relationships in the long term. UKÄ needs to be visible and physically present in the sector
	The IT system
	EU-level policy changes that may disrupt Sweden's quality assurance model
	Pressure from numerous directive-driven government assignments limiting UKÄ's autonomy

degree-awarding powers on the other hand – how can UKÄ utilise these connections?	External reputation risks due to financial and operational constraints
More effective planning and forward-looking evaluations	Conflicting assignments and unclear delineation of responsibilities with other agencies
Increased emphasis on best practice and knowledge sharing	Internationalisation of quality reviews
Strengthened international connections and monitoring of global developments	potentially increasing workload for HEIs
Greater autonomy in self-initiated evaluations and studies	Currently the Department of Legal Affairs carries out little dedicated legal supervision as an outreach activity concerning the HEIs. Instead the department is busy handling incoming complaints, appeals and questions from HEIs, HEI staff and students
Improved internal project management routines and financial planning	How does ENQA evaluate our work? What does the process look like? The self-assessment report is given too much weight.
Opportunity for innovation through leadership renewal and organisational restructuring	UKÄ's evaluations (programme evaluations and institutional reviews) are received differently by the HEIs. Large HEIs welcome them (since resources are available) and can advance the issue of autonomy, while smaller HEIs face a heavier burden. UKÄ needs to tread carefully to reduce their workload.
A large volume of high-quality data (that could be more utilised)	
Cooperation/clear delineation with UHR (Swedish Council for Higher Education)	
Shared and divided responsibilities	
Trust in the review process when politically motivated assignments arise – if these are translated into something the sector perceives as meaningful, trust is strengthened	
High degree of autonomy in self-initiated reviews, evaluations, analyses, and reports	
Strong international connections and participation	

10. Key challenges and areas for future development

This chapter highlights some challenges and areas for development that UKÄ aims to address over the next few years in relation to the agency's external quality assurance activities.

Implementation and follow-up of the revised national quality assurance framework

A goal in UKÄ's quality policy (5.6) is 'to work coordinated and resource efficient'. Building on the recommendations from the previous ENQA review, two national evaluations of UKÄ and the national framework for quality assurance, as well as continuous feedback from the higher education sector, UKÄ chose this as one of the starting points for the revision of its quality assurance activities described in the present report. As the revisions are now being implemented in practice, it will be crucial for UKÄ, in dialogue with the HEIs, to follow up closely that the changes actually contribute to less burdensome external quality assurance that is also more accurate, flexible, and resource-efficient.

For example, since UKÄ's institutional review (6.2.1) is the quality assurance activity that addresses the ESG comprehensively for HEIs on a cyclical basis, and more emphasis is now put on HEIs' responsibility to conduct evaluations of their programmes and research, the precision and fitness for purpose of this quality assurance activity will need to be continuously followed up. The combined model for reviewing HEIs' quality processes for both education and research will also need to be carefully followed up over time and adjusted as appropriate.

Further, the more active use of experiences and existing knowledge and data in UKÄ's programme evaluations (6.2.2) entails new challenges, as evaluations are adapted to best meet the development needs of the programme, partly identified by the HEIs themselves. Consequently, UKÄ will need to ensure that the evaluations are flexible and enhancement-oriented, while keeping assessment criteria transparent, consistent, and accurate.

As explained in 6.2.3, UKÄ has recently implemented a follow-up procedure for all applications for degree-awarding powers with a positive outcome. Information on how degree-awarding powers are used and on

how HEIs deal with possible problems starting a new programme are published in a report. UKÄ will need to monitor that this mechanism fulfils the intended purpose to spread information about the appraisal procedure and to support potential new applicants, and evaluate the benefits of this extended follow-up procedure in relation to the costs in terms of possibly increased administrative burden on HEIs and on UKÄ itself. On the other hand, with the recent changes, UKÄ has noted a tendency for applications received by the authority to be more complete, thus saving administrative resources for both HEIs and UKÄ (6.2, Reflections).

UKÄ's thematic evaluations have had a clear impact on the higher education sector. Reports and feedback conferences have contributed to the national picture of the themes investigated, and generated knowledge, sharing of experiences, and examples of good practice. However, as pointed out in 5.3, UKÄ receives a considerable number of assignments from the Government and has chosen to carry out several of these as thematic evaluations. A concern in relation to this raised by stakeholders (7.1) and in external evaluations of UKÄ and the national quality assurance framework is that resources allocated to such assignments risk reducing the agency's room for manoeuvre to choose relevant topics for thematic evaluations freely. Therefore, it will be important for UKÄ to address this challenge regularly.

Finally, UKÄ needs to follow closely and where appropriate contribute proactively to the ongoing revision of the ESG. Amended existing standards and the possible introduction of new standards will no doubt entail necessary adjustments to the national quality assurance framework, and UKÄ will need to secure a smooth implementation of the revised ESG, in close dialogue with HEIs and other stakeholders.

Impact and added value of UKÄ's reviews and analyses

Two other goals in UKÄ's quality policy are 'to be the acknowledged source of information about higher education and research', and 'create results that are beneficial for the development of the higher education and research sectors'. In order to reach these goals, UKÄ needs not only to produce solid and relevant knowledge, but also make it available and useful to the agency's target groups and a wider range of stakeholders.

UKÄ produces a wide range of results, such as statistical analyses, thematic analyses, and reports from quality assurance activities, as well as from identified areas in need of exploration and government assignments. While UKÄ is undoubtedly an acknowledged and highly trusted source of information about higher education and research, the awareness and impact of UKÄ's reviews and analyses might still be enhanced. Certain reports reach a wider audience, such as a recent UKÄ

report on the impact of evaluations on HEIs' administrative burden, and a report on academic freedom which attracted much attention within the higher education sector. These are topical reports of high relevance to the sector, and considerable media coverage helped communicate UKÄ's findings. However, UKÄ needs to develop ways of increasing the knowledge and impact of the rich and diverse results from all its operations and activities. To this end, the agency explores new ways of disseminating results that are useful and timely to HEIs and other stakeholders. Innovative examples of this are UKÄ's interactive official statistics web pages, and UKÄ's podcast.

Further, the aim of making UKÄ's knowledge and results more widely spread can also add to the quality policy goal of being 'an attractive employer where dedicated employees have the possibility to develop'. As revealed in the SWOT-analysis (chapter 9), the expertise and knowledge of UKÄ staff is considered an important asset, staff members are loyal to the task, and UKÄ's expert staff enjoy high trust from stakeholders. At the same time, staff turnover is sometimes high and retaining talent can be a challenge to the agency. A staff survey conducted in 2023 showed that staff members are highly positive about their inspiring and motivating work, but that at times they feel that their competence is slightly underexploited. Enhancing the visibility of knowledge and results produced within the agency might further improve the sense of fulfilment in staff, add to the feeling of satisfaction with the task, and to a sense of importance of the impact of UKÄ's contribution to quality enhancement in higher education and research.

Internationalisation

The accelerated internationalisation of higher education and research places new demands on UKÄ's quality assurance, which operates in an increasingly transnational environment. As shown in this report, UKÄ's national quality assurance framework is based on national legislation, the ESG, and European guidelines for research. This is proof that Sweden strives to live up to agreements within the Bologna process and implement the agreed Bologna tools and key commitments. In order to support Swedish HEIs in their internationalisation and keep UKÄ's methods and processes for external quality assurance relevant and fit for purpose in an increasingly international context, the agency needs continuously to strengthen its cooperation with quality assurance organisations in Europe and beyond, and participate in international networks, working groups, meetings, courses, conferences, and other ways to follow the international developments.

Swedish HEIs have responded well to the push for increased internationalisation, and a clear example of this is the 24 Swedish HEIs included in alliances within the European Universities initiative. The development of European universities leads to more international joint programmes and alliances that need quality assurance, which risks

increasing the workload for the HEIs. For UKÄ, this means, for example, that the agency needs to follow closely and relate to the development of transnational quality assurance in the EHEA.

As shown in this report, UKÄ's quality assurance framework is compliant with the ESG, but although the ESG apply also to programmes offered through transnational collaboration, there are challenges associated with quality assurance that affect both alliances in the European Universities initiative and joint programmes. These challenges often relate to differences in the way various countries view quality assurance and differences in national regulations. To address such challenges, comprehensive processes are needed where HEIs can be better equipped to navigate through different systems, adapt, and ultimately arrive at solutions that allow them to be successful.

Without changes to Swedish law, UKÄ is not permitted to conduct quality assurance in other countries, or recognise quality assurance of other EQAR-registered organisations in relation to the education or research of Swedish HEIs. This may create challenges for HEIs to benefit fully from international collaboration and it could impede Sweden's ability to attract talent.

In order to address such developments proactively, UKÄ has identified a need for clear direction and priorities in its international activities in quality assurance. Key principles of the agency's internationalisation activities are, for instance:

- **Business development** through peer learning and bench marking activities, such as international networks, courses and exchanges, which will contribute to increased innovation and fitness for purpose of UKÄ's external quality assurance activities.
- **Competence development** of UKÄ staff in order to be agile and well equipped to operate in a sector in change towards increased internationalisation.
- **Intelligence, analysis, communication, and influence.** In order to be able to prioritise, UKÄ needs to monitor developments in the surrounding world, in particular within the EHEA and the European Research Area, and when appropriate be proactive in the European development of quality assurance of education and research, for example, the development of transnational quality assurance and the current revision of the ESG.

UKÄ's international activities in quality assurance linked to the above-mentioned aims are divided into five main areas, partly overlapping (4.2): participation in networks and organisations; UKÄ's International Advisory Committee; competence development; communication; and self-initiated projects and analyses. Exchanges and collaborations should focus where UKÄ has comparative advantages and can contribute with knowledge and experience, for example, in quality assurance of research,

student participation in quality assurance, and gender equality. Further priorities are areas where UKÄ needs to develop new knowledge and keep up with important policy changes, for example, training of assessors and transnational quality assurance; or areas where the agency is particularly innovative and can contribute to the development of events, for example, in student participation and influence, and thematic evaluations.

UKÄ has considerably increased its international engagement and collaboration since the last ENQA review; for example, internationalisation was one of the agency's priority areas in 2023, and a new group was established within the Department of Quality Assurance with the aim of strengthening international presence and collaboration, as well as international competence development.

Abbreviations

Abbreviations	
AC	Assessment Criteria
BFUG/TPG C	Bologna Follow-Up Group/Thematic Peer Group C on Quality Assurance
BFUG/TPD D	Bologna Follow-Up Group/Thematic Peer Group D on Social Dimension
CoARA	Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment
ECA	European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education
ECTS	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
EQA	External Quality Assurance
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education
ESG	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area
FL	Administrative Procedure Act (2017:900)
HAN	Higher Education Expulsions Board
Hcéres	High Council for the Evaluation of Research and Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HF	Higher Education Ordinance (1993:100)
HL	Swedish Higher Education Act (1992:1434)
HR	Human resources
INQAAHE	International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
Instr. UHR	Ordinance with instructions for the Swedish Council for Higher Education (2012:811)
Instr. UKÄ	Ordinance with instructions for the Swedish Higher Education Authority (2012:810)
IT	Information Technology
JO	Parliamentary Ombudsmen
NOQA	Nordic Network of Quality Assurance
Plint	Platform for Internationalisation
QA	Quality Assurance
QAN	Quality Audit Network
RF	Instrument of Government (1974:152)
SAR	Self-Assessment Report
SeQF	Swedish Qualifications Framework
SEK	Swedish krona
SUHF	Association of Swedish Higher Education Institutions
SULF	Swedish Association of University Teachers and Researchers
SWOT	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats

UHR	Swedish Council for Higher Education
UKÄ	Swedish Higher Education Authority
ÖNH	Higher Education Appeals Board

Annex 1 ESG Part 2 alignment

Alignment of ESG Part 2 with key principles of UKÄ's external quality assurance processes

External QA activity	Key principles of UKÄ QA processes							
	Self-assessment (ESG 2.3)	Site visit (ESG 2.3)	Consistent follow-up (ESG 2.3)	Peer-review experts (ESG 2.4)	Student assessors (ESG 2.4)	Published criteria (ESG 2.5)	Published reports and decisions (ESG 2.6)	Complaints and appeals (ESG 2.7)
Institutional reviews	Yes Self-assessment report (and student report)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Programme evaluations	Yes Self-assessment report	Yes Interviews	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Appraisal of applications for degree-awarding powers	Yes Application for degree-awarding powers	Yes Interviews	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Thematic evaluations	Yes Self-assessment report	Yes/No	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes

Annex 2 List of Supporting documents

1 Ordinance with instructions for the Swedish Higher Education Authority (2012:810) (in Swedish. A non-official English translation is available)

2 Public service agreement for 2025 for the Swedish Higher Education Authority (in Swedish)

3 The Higher Education Ordinance (1993:100)⁵⁴ (in English)

4 Transnational Quality Assurance. Swedish higher education institutions' experiences of quality assurance of European Universities alliances and joint programmes, UKÄ 2024.

5 National quality assurance framework – to strengthen the quality of higher education and research (draft in Swedish)⁵⁵

6 The Instrument of Government (1974:152) (in English)

7 The Freedom of the Press Act (1949:105) (in English)

8 Public access to information and secrecy. The legislation in brief. Ministry of Justice 2020 (in English)

9 National framework for quality assurance of higher education. Presentation of a government assignment, UKÄ Report 2016:15 (in English)

10 Rules of procedure at the Swedish Higher Education Authority (internal document in Swedish)

⁵⁴ Chapter 1, section 12

⁵⁵ A non-official translated version will be available in English at the site visit.

11 Improving quality – a developed methodology for UKÄ's reviews (UKÄ 2024)

12 Evaluation of the national system for quality assurance in higher education. Analysis of the current cycle: 2017–2022, Faugert/Technopolis Group, 2020. (in Swedish)⁵⁶

13 Public Service Agreement for 2024 for the Swedish Higher Education Authority (in Swedish)

14 Agency Analysis of the Swedish Higher Education Authority, Statskontorets myndighetsanalys (2024:2)⁵⁷

15 Revised directive for the operation plan 2025 (Internal document in Swedish)

16 Guidelines for competence provision (Internal document in Swedish)

17 Annual report for the Swedish Higher Education Authority 2024 (in Swedish)⁵⁸

18 Operational plan Swedish Higher Education Authority 2024 (Internal document in Swedish; A non-official English translation is available)⁵⁹

19 Guidelines for systematic information security work at the Swedish Higher Education Authority (Internal document in Swedish)

20 Quality policy (in English)

21 Guidelines for the management of internal governing documents (Internal document in Swedish)

22 Guidelines for managing irregularities, representation, conflicts of interest, and secondary employment (Internal document in Swedish)

⁵⁶ A non-official English translation is available.

⁵⁷ A non-official English translation is available.

⁵⁸ A non-official translated version will be available in English at the site visit.

⁵⁹ Operational plan for 2025 will be available at the site visit.

- 23 Disclosure of conflict of interest in assignments for the Swedish Higher Education Authority (Internal document in Swedish)
- 24 Guidelines for recruitment at the Swedish Higher Education Authority (Internal document in Swedish)
- 25 Employee and manager policy (Internal document in Swedish)
- 26 Guidelines for handling harassment, sexual harassment, reprisals and offensive discrimination at the Swedish Higher Education Authority (Internal document in Swedish)
- 27 Guidelines for reviewing the HEIs' quality assurance processes for education and research (in English)
- 28 Guidelines for the evaluation of first and second-cycle programmes (in English)
- 29 Guidelines for the evaluation of third-cycle programmes (in English)
- 30 Guidelines for applications for degree-awarding powers (in English)
- 31 Guidelines for thematic evaluation of widening participation in higher education 2020 (in Swedish)
- 32 The Swedish Higher Education Act (1992:1434) (in English)
- 33 Administrative Procedure Act (2017:900) (non-official translation in English)
- 34 The Public Employment Act (1994:260) (non-official translation in English)
- 35 The Employment Ordinance (1994:373) (in Swedish)
- 36 Act concerning authority to award certain qualifications (1993:792) (in English)
- 37 Ordinance with instructions for the Swedish Council for Higher Education (in Swedish)

- 38 Guidelines for thematic evaluation of nursing education 2022 (in Swedish)
- 39 Guidelines for thematic evaluation of collaboration with the surrounding community 2024 (in English)
- 40 Impact of evaluations on the administrative burden in the higher education sector (in Swedish)
- 41 A system review – A summary analysis of the national system for quality assurance 2017–2022 (in English)
- 42 Guidelines for the reassessment of decisions within external quality assurance of higher education (in Swedish)
- 43 Guidelines for handling complaints regarding the external quality assurance of higher education institutions (internal document in Swedish)
- 44 Report Stakeholder survey 2024 (internal document in Swedish; a non-official English translation is available)

We evaluate the quality of higher education and research. We are responsible for official statistics and we monitor compliance with laws and regulations among universities and university colleges.

uka.se

