



# How did things turn out?

A mid-term report on the National Agency for Higher Education's quality evaluations 2001–2003

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**A midterm report on the National Agency for Higher Education's  
quality evaluations 2001–2003**

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# Table of Contents

<b>Preface »</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Summary »</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Historical Review »</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>The Swedish evaluation system from a European point of view »</b>	<b>12</b>
Why evaluate? .....	13
European cooperation .....	13
Quality assurance in some other countries .....	14
What characterises Sweden? .....	17
<b>Evaluations of subjects and programmes in 2003 »</b>	<b>18</b>
What do the reports show? .....	19
<b>Evaluation of subjects and programmes 2001–2003 – a mid-term report »</b>	<b>26</b>
Expectations and observations .....	27
Foreign assessors on Swedish programmes .....	33
The labour market perspective .....	35
Quality assurance of the evaluations of subjects and programmes .....	36
The assessors .....	38
<b>To be continued »</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>References »</b>	<b>42</b>

**Preface »**

Three years have elapsed since the National Agency for Higher Education started its national evaluations of subjects and programmes. During a period of six years all programmes leading to the award of a general or vocational qualification will be appraised. In this mid-term report, we should like to summarise the evaluation process during the years 2001–2003 – what has come to our attention, how the process has been developed and its quality assured. We should also like to look at what lies ahead, and here international developments in higher education will be, to say the least, of decisive importance.

Overall the work that has taken place within the framework of the quality evaluation system is impressive. About 700 programmes have been appraised during these three years. More than 300 assessors have taken part. Add to this all those who have participated from the higher education institutions – teachers, undergraduate and postgraduate students, those responsible for quality and the managements of the institutions – not to mention the staff of the National Agency itself.

Many of the general impressions we have accounted for in the summaries published in previous years also apply to the evaluations undertaken in 2003. These include the lack of

financial resources, teaching staff with punishing workloads, the frequent dearth of classroom teaching, variations in the conditions for postgraduate students and many small scholarly environments. These results mean that the advice we have given to both the higher education institutions and the government in previous years still stands: profile to a greater extent, cooperate and concentrate.

International developments will assume greater importance for higher education in Sweden. The Bologna process is evolving. We hope that the overall analysis and the insights provided here will contribute to a continued discussion of quality in higher education in Sweden from an international perspective as well.

This report forms part of the account submitted to the government by the National Agency for Higher Education in accordance with its terms of reference and has been discussed by the Board of the Agency.



SIGBRIT FRANKE

UNIVERSITY CHANCELLOR

**Summary »**

On the whole the quality of higher education in Sweden is good. This is shown in the present report, which analyses three years of the National Agency for Higher Education's evaluations of programmes and subjects. According to the foreign experts the programmes stand up to international comparison.

A number of recurring problems highlighted in the evaluations concern the lack of financial resources and often too limited research milieux. The Agency's general recommendations for improving quality are profiling, cooperation and concentration. Of the 700 appraised undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, degree-awarding powers of the institutions concerned have been queried in 69 cases. These programmes have failed to reach a minimum level of academic acceptability. Querying the entitlement to award a degree is a powerful instrument to encourage quality enhancement. The improvement measures introduced by the institutions have meant that the National Agency has not yet been compelled to revoke any degree-awarding powers.

Questions of quality assurance have become increasingly important internationally. The Swedish evaluation system compares favourably with those of other countries. It is an ambitious model, covering all subjects and vocational degrees. In no other country are evaluations carried out with one and

the same panel assessing all undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in one subject across all higher education institutions.

Over the years the evaluations have had an impact on a very large number of those involved in higher education. In addition to the teachers, students and departmental, faculty and institutional administrators who have been involved, 330 assessors have participated. About 60 per cent of the subject experts have come from outside Sweden.

This report also accounts specifically for the evaluations undertaken in 2003. During the year, about 200 evaluations took place of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in specialist translation, cultural studies, social anthropology, ethnology, sociology and related subjects, computer and systems science/informatics, psychology and the certification of psychologists, earth sciences, agrarian programmes and oriental languages. On the whole the evaluations have been positive. A follow-up study has also taken place during the year of the evaluation of the work of the higher education institutions on gender equality, student influence and social and ethnic diversity. This reveals that conditions at the higher education institutions have improved considerably, especially with regard to social and ethnic diversity.



**Historical Review »**

What is the quality of higher education really like? How do Swedish programmes compare internationally? These are questions that have often been posed to the National Agency throughout the years. Today, as before, they must be approached in terms of what kind of quality is concerned, in which context the discussion is taking place and who is asking them – do they come from students, representatives of the higher education institutions or politicians. It is easy to disregard this self-evident fact when the merits and the shortcomings of higher education are being discussed. There is of course no simple answer to these questions. The National Agency's evaluations attempt to view quality from different goals and perspectives.

What demands and needs has the National Agency attempted to fulfil?

Since 1995, the National Agency has been conducting evaluations that belong in principle to one of four different categories:

- Appraisal of the entitlement of higher education institutions to award general degrees and vocational qualifications, appraisal of entitlement to award postgraduate degrees in specific areas of research and the entitlement of an institution to university status.
- Quality audits at an institutional level.
- National evaluations of specific aspects of quality.
- National evaluations of subjects and programmes that lead to the award of a general degree or a vocational qualification.

All of these evaluations have been based on some form of documentation, either an application or a self-evaluation. The actual reviews have been conducted by specially appointed experts.

Appraisal of entitlement to award degrees, which started as early as 1993 by what was then called the Office of the University Chancellor, can be seen in the light of the development of the regional university colleges, which were granted, to begin with, only limited entitlement to award degrees. Up until today, these appraisals, which resemble accreditation procedures have involved extremely exhaustive procedures and the external appraisal has been shown to have contributed to the development and legitimacy of the university colleges. Appraisal has taken place of about 600 applications for entitlement to award degrees from both state-run higher education institutions and independent providers. About a quarter of these have been rejected. Developments in the university colleges have resulted in an increasing number of applications to award postgraduate degrees in an area of research and this decision is made by the government after appraisal or a quality evaluation conducted by the National Agency.

The quality on which these appraisals focus is related to the conditions offered at the higher education institution for the provision and implementation of programmes at a certain level, for instance master's programmes in a specific subject or alternatively postgraduate programmes in an entire area of research.

**Appraisal of the entitlement to award degrees** has fulfilled and continues to fulfil an important legitimising function, which has been particularly important in the development of the regional university colleges.

The National Agency's appraisals of areas of research in connection with an application to be granted university status have in some cases led to political decisions which have run counter to the Agency's recommendations. It goes without saying that this is not beneficial for the legitimacy of quality evaluation procedures.

**Quality audits**, which focus on the administration of the higher education institutions, started in 1995 and two rounds have been completed. These audits may be seen as a response to the increased responsibility which the higher education institutions were then given for their own quality assurance and quality development strategies. The audits have not concentrated primarily on the quality of their offerings but rather on the measures, strategies, methods and systems established in the institutions to assure and develop quality. The idea was that audits of this kind would mainly help to provide support for internal quality assurance procedures.

After two rounds had been completed, it could be determined that, despite the zeal with which quality assurance procedures were organised at many higher education institutions, these quality audits had only limited impact on quality development at departmental level.<sup>1</sup> In these circumstances, after consultation with the government, the Agency decided to suspend the quality audits for a period. It should perhaps be added that these audits have attracted a great deal of international attention from researchers and institutional representatives as a good example of a model that showed great consideration for the distinctive features and intentions of the different higher education institutions. On the other hand, criticism was expressed by those who found it difficult to understand the point of this approach, in particular because it was perceived as yielding no information about the quality of what the higher education institutions were offering.

The quality audits fulfilled an important function when they were introduced during the transition to a decentralised

system of higher education. The audits have helped to raise awareness of quality issues among senior administrators at the higher education institutions and in this way have encouraged development.

In 1999 the National Agency conducted its first evaluation of specific central aspects of quality. These concerned the work of the higher education institutions on gender equality, student influence and social and ethnic diversity.<sup>2</sup> This evaluation enabled comparisons to be made between the institutions. It was also important to present examples of good practice that could provide stimulation for other institutions as they continued to work with the aspects of quality concerned. This evaluation can also be seen as one way of countering the simplistic debate about ranking that was taking place at the time. The National Agency was averse to any kind of comparison involving the ranking of institutions. On the other hand the Agency considered that the outcome of measures relating to specific aspects of quality could be compared.

In 2001 the National Agency was given the task of evaluating all undergraduate and postgraduate programmes during a six-year period. Demands had been expressed for the universities to undergo quality evaluations corresponding to the appraisals made of the university colleges when they applied for entitlement to award a degree. Greater student influence and the increasing internationalisation of higher education also contributed to the establishment of a quality evaluation system. Evaluations of subjects and programmes would also ensure that quality assurance procedures had an impact not only on central administrators but throughout the higher

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1. Wahlén, S., (2004), Does national quality monitoring make a difference? In: Quality in Higher Education.

2. See the reports *The Efforts of Higher Education Institutions to Develop Gender Equality, Student Influence and Social and Ethnic Diversity* (National Agency Report 2000:8 R) and *Examples of good practice to promote gender equality, student influence and social and ethnic diversity in higher education institutions* (National Agency Report 2000:9 R).

education institutions. It was also assumed that evaluations that dealt with subjects and vocational qualifications would provide information for prospective students and aid improvement and development of the programmes. One important aspect of the subject and programme evaluations is that all the programmes in the country undergo the same appraisal. Another is that these evaluations enable some degree of comparison between different institutions. An additional aspect which could have an important impact on quality measures was that if the quality of a programme prove inadequate, the National Agency is empowered to query and, if necessary, revoke the right to award undergraduate degrees.

The National Agency for Higher Education has now reached the half-way stage in its evaluation of subjects and programmes: the 2004 evaluations are still under way, planning has begun of the evaluations for 2005 and reviews of the evaluations published in 2001 will be taking place this year.

**The Swedish evaluation  
system from a European  
point of view »**

## Why evaluate?

Today there are various forms of national evaluation of higher education in most European countries and in many in other parts of the world. This has been a rapid development. Sweden began relatively early, introducing quality audits in 1995. Of the Western Europe countries, at that time only France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Denmark had developed all-embracing quality evaluation systems with varying degrees of coverage and different focuses.

There are several reasons for this development. A shift took place in a large number of countries from a regulatory system to a management by objectives approach, which led to the decentralisation of decision-making processes and at the same time the requirement that the national authorities could monitor outcomes. The major expansion of higher education also brought with it concerns that quality would deteriorate. It then became important to be able to monitor quality assurance and also to stimulate improvement. Another component consisted, of course, of the desire to be able to determine whether the state and the taxpayers were getting value for the funds allocated to higher education institutions. In the countries of southern and eastern Europe the rapid expansion of independent higher education institutions has made it necessary to be able to monitor them. This is then a question of accreditation or approval of the programmes offered.

The rapid changes in the degree system throughout Europe resulting from the 'Bologna process' are today another driving force behind developments.<sup>3</sup> For instance, bachelor's and

master's degree programmes have been or are being developed in, for example Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland, Spain, and several of the new European Union Member States. In many of these countries each higher education institution must apply for accreditation of new degrees.

## European cooperation

The National Agency for Higher Education is participating in European cooperation on the evaluation of higher education within the framework of ENQA (The European Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education).<sup>4</sup> This network now has about 40 member organisations. ENQA has come to play an important role in the Bologna process, as the Ministers of Education in the countries that have acceded to it share the view that quality assurance plays an important role in the development of higher education in Europe. At a meeting of Ministers of Education held in Berlin in 2003, agreement was reached on assigning to ENQA the specific task of developing mutually acceptable criteria and methods for quality assurance. The aim is that by the next meeting of ministers in Bergen in 2005, the countries that have already acceded to the process will have developed a system that includes, for instance:

- Evaluation of programmes/subjects or higher education institutions based on self-evaluation, external appraisal, student participation and published reports.

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3. The Bologna process is a joint initiative in higher education in Europe, which started at a meeting of a large number of European countries at Bologna. The intention is for these countries to make joint endeavours to ensure that European higher education becomes internationally even more competitive. This is to be achieved, for instance, through the introduction of a system of comparable degrees (bachelor's and master's), a common system of credits (the European Credit Transfer System, ECTS) for student attainment, greater mobility in Europe for students and teachers, and support for a European dimension in higher education. One important feature is also cooperation on quality assurance.

4. Web-site: [www.enqa.net](http://www.enqa.net)

- A system of accreditation, certification or their counterparts.
- The participation of international assessors and cooperation between countries.

These requirements have been satisfied in Sweden for many years.

The National Agency is represented in the groups created by ENQA to draw up the recommendations on which decisions to be made in Bergen will be based. There is also close cooperation with the quality assurance organisations in the Nordic countries, involving, among other things, joint projects.

### **Quality assurance in some other countries**

The models adopted for evaluation vary.<sup>5</sup> In the last decade, many countries in Europe have implemented major or minor reforms resulting from the introduction of new degree systems or in order to focus on various aspects of the higher education system. A few examples are given below of countries with different kinds of experience.

#### **Denmark**

Between 1992 and 1998, Denmark's 'Evalueringscentret' carried out a seven-year programme in which all undergraduate subjects and programmes at all higher education institutions were evaluated. This comprised self-evaluations by the departments, site visits by panels of assessors consisting of foreign, mainly Scandinavian, and Danish experts and representatives

of future employers. The stakeholder perspective was very explicit. For instance, extensive studies were made using questionnaires sent to current and former students in the various subjects and to employers. The results of each evaluation were presented in a published report, the contents of which were discussed by the institutions at a conference before publication.

The Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA)<sup>6</sup> was established in 1999 and Evalueringscentret was integrated into the new organisation. It has a considerably more extensive mandate than Evalueringscentret, which is to take responsibility for evaluation of the entire Danish educational system, from the early school years to undergraduate courses in higher education. However, EVA has no mandate concerning postgraduate programmes.

Today a second round of evaluations of subjects and programmes is taking place using much the same method as the previous one, while at the same time evaluation systems for entire higher education institutions or at faculty level are also being developed. In addition, EVA accredits professional qualifications up to the level of a bachelor's degree.

Finally it should be added that EVA also has the task of disseminating information and expertise about the methodology of evaluation in the educational system, a task that had previously been assigned to the Evalueringscentret.

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5. A comprehensive review of the methodology of evaluating higher education can be found in the report *Quality Procedures in European Higher Education (2003)*. ENQA Occasional Papers 5. This is available on ENQA's web-site.

6. Web-site: [www.eva.dk](http://www.eva.dk)

## Finland

The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (Finheec)<sup>7</sup> began its work in 1995 and has a much wider range of tasks than many other similar organisations. It is an autonomous unit answerable to the Ministry of Education and its main task is to make the appraisals required for recognition of vocational higher education institutions and to evaluate both subjects and, above all, entire higher education institutions, often from some specific perspective. One such perspective in recent years has been the impact of higher education on a region in Finland. An additional task for the Council is the accreditation, by a special board, of certain vocational programmes (specialisation courses) on the basis of the evaluation of a panel of experts.

Finheec normally adopts the customary model of self-evaluation, peer-assessment and the publication of a report, but is not restricted in its choice of methods.

Finheec also has the task of providing support to the higher education institutions on evaluation issues. This takes the form of training and counselling.

In Finland, higher education departments and units may apply for nomination as “centres of excellence” for particular achievements in undergraduate programmes in universities, polytechnics and adult education. Finheec is responsible for the nomination and the government makes the final decision and awards special funding to the higher education institution to which the department or unit belongs.<sup>8</sup>

## Norway

In connection with the introduction of bachelor’s and master’s degrees at Norwegian higher education institutions in 2003, a new model was adopted for quality assurance in higher education. This focuses mainly on the institutions and is based on accreditation. The responsibility for its implementation lies with the Nasjonalt organ for kvalitet i utdanningen (NOKUT).<sup>9</sup>

Between 2004 and 2008 all state-run higher education institutions are to undergo an audit of their quality assurance systems at institutional level. These audits are to be repeated every fifth year. Those not considered to have acceptable quality assurance structures will lose the right to develop new courses and programmes. If they want to regain this entitlement, they will have to apply for a new audit.

In the same way, university colleges that wish to offer master’s degrees or postgraduate programmes will have to gain accreditation for the subject concerned. Finally, it is also possible for an independent university college to apply for the status of accredited university college, specialised university (vitenskaplig høyskole) or university. This requires an appraisal of both the institution’s own quality assurance system and the conditions that apply for the subjects it offers. State university colleges may also apply for the status of specialised university or university.

Institutional appraisals are based on expert evaluation and result in the publication of a report. No self-evaluation takes place as the quality assurance systems are required to produce sufficient documentation to enable evaluation. However, an

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<sup>7</sup> Web-site: [www.finheec.fi](http://www.finheec.fi)

<sup>8</sup> For many years university departments have been able to apply for nomination as “Centres of Excellence” for research. In these cases Finland’s Academy is responsible for nomination.

<sup>9</sup> Web-site: [www.nokut.no](http://www.nokut.no)



institution is expected to submit a description of its system, which, together with the site visit, is used as the basis of the evaluation.

### England

Of all the European countries, it is England which, for better or worse, has the most comprehensive evaluation in Europe. Regular appraisals of research take place and these are linked to the allocation of resources. In addition, until recently undergraduate programmes were evaluated by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA).<sup>10</sup> Professional organisations are also involved in the accreditation of many vocationally oriented programmes, such as those awarding degrees in engineering.

After severe criticism had been expressed by the universities of the extent and the intrusiveness of the evaluation process, a new method was introduced in England just over a year ago. This is based on a six-year cycle and involves an audit of the institution's quality assurance system and four to five specialist evaluations at departmental level ('audit trails') to provide some impression of the impact of the quality assurance system on programmes offered. The appraisal centres mainly on:

- Internal quality assurance of subjects and programmes.
- What is demanded of the students and the level of attainment.
- Quality assurance of teaching staff (recruitment processes, course evaluations, promotion).

In addition, all the higher education institutions have to publish information about the results and the quality of their programmes using a model agreed between the university and the

QAA. The appraisals are based not only on self-evaluations and site visits but also on a "Code of Practice" which contains guidelines developed by QAA in consultation with institutions and other stakeholders about how universities may deal with, for example, assessment, the problems of students with special needs, information and student counselling.

The published reports conclude with a judgement which states that the QAA has complete confidence in the quality assurance system, limited confidence or no confidence at all. However, there are no direct sanctions that can be invoked.

### Reflections

Systematic evaluations of higher education are being made in the vast majority of European countries. The examples above demonstrate that, although they share the same premises, they have different focuses and differ in implementation. Approaches also change with time. Countries which used to place the emphasis on subjects and programmes are now conducting evaluations at an institutional level to a greater extent. For Sweden, it may be important to reflect in the future on some of the following features.

The role of stakeholders is important. Denmark has opted for a specific study of the attitudes of employers and students to the programmes. Opinions are divided on the value of studies of this kind in relation to the costs involved. However, in the future, Sweden should take the employers' perspective into account more than it does at the moment. Also, the idea of evaluating levels other than institution or subject/programme, as in Denmark, should be considered.

The Finnish "centres of excellence" seem to be a development measure that deserves closer study. In the same way, the Norwegian model with sanctions for institutions that do not

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<sup>10</sup> Web-site: [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)

meet the quality assurance demands for their programmes is interesting.

Finally, the combination of appraisal at institutional level with the evaluation of subjects that has recently evolved in the United Kingdom should be studied from the point of view of the development of our own system of evaluation in higher education.

### **What characterises Sweden?**

In many ways the premises and the procedures adopted for evaluation in Sweden concur with those in other European countries. On the whole, the aims are the same: development, information and monitoring.<sup>11</sup> Evaluations are made of both entire higher education institutions and of subjects and programmes, together with accreditation and benchmarking.

The responsibility for evaluations in Sweden rests, as in many other countries, with an evaluating agency that is independent of the government and the higher education institutions themselves. Appraisals are based on self-evaluation and a site visit by a panel of external experts and most often conclude with the publication of a report.

Following up the outcome of the evaluations is not the task of the evaluating agency in every country. In some places the authorities (Ministry of Education) is responsible for this phase. In addition, the higher education institutions themselves are, of course, expected to take action on the basis of the results.

The points where the Swedish evaluation system differs most from the majority of other European countries are these:

- The point of departure in the Swedish model for the evaluation of subjects and programmes is that the outcome of a programme may be based on the conditions that prevail and how the programme is implemented. It is therefore important to include all three of these aspects in the evaluation: conditions, process and outcomes.
- Students participate to an increasing extent in evaluations of higher education in Europe, but their role in Sweden, both formally and in practice, is more important than in many countries.
- In Sweden, unlike most other countries in Europe, both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes are involved in the same evaluation. Otherwise, postgraduate programmes are normally included as one aspect in the evaluation of research, so that the quality of doctoral theses, for instance, is an important variable in these appraisals.
- In no other country are evaluations carried out with one and the same panel assessing all the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in one subject at all higher education institutions.
- The follow-up of each evaluation arranged by the National Agency after three years is an integral part of the evaluation process.
- Sanctions in the form of revoking the entitlement to award degrees provides a guarantee of quality for all higher education programmes that lead to the award of a qualification.

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11. See also the report *Quality Procedures in European Higher Education (2003)*. ENQA Occasional Papers 5.

**Evaluations of subjects and  
programmes in 2003 »**

During 2003, 10 evaluations of subjects and programmes have been completed, involving a total of about 200 appraisals. The table below lists the evaluations that have taken place and the number of appraisals required for each of them.<sup>12</sup> Several evaluations have involved subjects that are offered at a large number of higher education institutions, such as psychology and sociology. The evaluation of oriental languages, however, has dealt with a large number of subjects at a few institutions. Five different vocational qualifications have been evaluated at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences. One additional vocational qualification, the certification of psychologists, was also included in the evaluations made in 2003.

Table 1: Evaluations and number of appraisals.

Evaluation	Appraisals
Specialist translation	1
Cultural studies, cultural education	3
Social anthropology, cultural anthropology	10
Ethnology	13
Sociology, criminology, sociology of law, social psychology, work sciences	40
Computer and system science/informatics	30
Psychology, certification of psychologists	37
Earth sciences	20
Agrarian studies programmes	10
Oriental languages	31
<b>Total</b>	<b>195</b>

## What do the reports show?

### Agrarian studies programmes – a separate system of degrees

The programmes evaluated, which lead to the award of degrees or diplomas in agricultural sciences, landscape architecture, landscape construction, farm management and equine studies and qualifications in soil science, animal sciences, food sciences and landscape planning, are all offered by the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU). The general assessment of the courses offered is positive, and the postgraduate programmes are impressive, in particular in soil studies, animal sciences and food sciences. Even though throughput is high, there may be problems in recruiting qualified staff in future, as few postgraduate students intend to remain at the university.

To guarantee academic standards, improvement is required of the objectives and organisation of programmes leading to the award of qualifications in farm management and equine studies.

In view of the changes in attitude to the future of the land-based industries, review is needed of the programmes offered at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences. In the memorandum published by the Ministry of Education after the completion of the evaluation,<sup>13</sup> it is proposed that the degree in veterinary medicine should be the sole remaining vocational degree awarded by the University. University diplomas would be awarded on completion of programmes in farm management and equine studies.

The National Agency for Higher Education has queried the entitlement to award a diploma in equine studies as the

12. Although the evaluations took place during 2003, all the reports except one were published in 2004 (for the reports see *References*). Appraisal of both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes at one institution are counted as two appraisals.

13. *Högre utbildning i utveckling. Bolognaprocessen i svensk belysning (Developments in Higher Education. The Bologna Process from a Swedish perspective)* (Ds 2004:2).

programme is not considered to meet the requirements for relevant practical training.

The National Agency also proposes that the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences should be accountable to the Ministry of Education and Science rather than the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries.

### **Work sciences – many different directions in the same discipline**

Use of the term ‘work sciences’ conceals an area of study that comprises a wide variety of disciplinary interests and conceptions of the subject. When undertaken as a multidisciplinary project, the subject is also characterised by the variety of forms it can assume, so that it is therefore impossible to speak of *one* work science. We are dealing with a number of sciences from various faculties that merely share an interest in one object, human work.

The National Agency queries the entitlement of the University College of Malmö to award a bachelor’s degree in work sciences as the level of the programme is considered to be far too elementary to meet acceptable academic standards.

### **Ethnology – a national approach with local profiles**

Ethnology is a large and well-reputed subject in the Nordic countries. In Sweden ethnology differs from its counterparts in the other Nordic countries in its integration of folklore studies with ethnology and this has become part of the local profile adopted by many higher education institutions. There is no great variation, however, in the programmes offered in Sweden. One positive exception is the music ethnology offered at Umeå University.

Ethnic diversity, gender and power are emphasised to varying extents in several programmes. Historically, ethnology is a subject that has dealt with cultural variation: the cultures

of different groups, local and regional cultures, cultural demarcation lines, etc. In this way ethnic diversity has always formed part of the ethnological perspective. The programmes lack, however, discussion of what differentiates ethnic diversity from cultural variety. Unlike the other Nordic countries, the national approach in the subject is more explicit in Sweden. Considerably more students are being trained in Sweden as well, at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, in comparison with the other Nordic countries.

### **Specialist translation – a clear profile and high quality**

The programme in specialist translation at Göteborg University is the only one of its kind and is characterised by the thought that has gone into its planning and by the high academic standards of its teachers. The programme has a great many applicants and its students are well qualified on entry. In addition to specialist translation, a number of courses in translation and interpretation are offered which vary in length and content. This is not an easy field to grasp and consolidation of the courses is required to provide students with more explicit choices. Information about future employment prospects also needs to be improved. One potential group of students are those who wish to translate from Swedish to the major immigrant languages.

### **Earth sciences – from a descriptive to a more experimental subject**

Earth sciences comprises a broad range of subjects and only the large universities with a large staff of specialised teachers and substantial research support can aim to cover the entire range. A large number of the teachers on undergraduate programmes have PhDs and at several higher education institutions the proportion of those actively involved in research is large at most higher education institutions. However, there

are few women teachers. While the programmes are generally provided with good facilities and library services, the number of students enrolled on earth sciences programmes in Sweden has halved during a seven-year period.

The higher education institutions have adopted various profiles but they are advised against profiling themselves at the lower levels as most students who begin to study earth sciences or physical geography have acquired no prior knowledge in these subjects in the upper-secondary school and therefore need a grounding to rely on.

The term natural geography can have a wide range of diffuse meanings when used to describe a subject and overlaps other earth science subjects such as ecological-system analysis. The profile adopted by a specific institution should be clearly indicated in the name given to the subject, in syllabuses and in all the marketing to avoid giving students the impression that the entire subject area is covered by a programme.

Few students are aware of the employment opportunities that studies of earth sciences and geography can lead to. Lund University attempts, however, to adapt its geology programmes to vocational needs, as does Göteborg University in its marine programme.

The National Agency queries the entitlement of Karlstad University to award bachelor's degrees in earth sciences because of the lack of subject breadth and inadequately qualified teachers and also the entitlement of Mithögskolan (the Mid-Sweden University College) to award bachelor's degrees in physical geography because of inadequately qualified teachers and lack of continuity in the courses offered.

#### **Informatics – a broad and multi-faceted subject expanding vigorously**

This subject, offered at 20 higher education institutions, is broad and multi-faceted and the number of student places

has expanded rapidly and vigorously. Since the figure peaked in 1998, however, the number of qualified applicants has declined by 75 per cent. In 2003, only 14 per cent of the individual programmes in this field filled all their places. The rapid expansion has had a detrimental impact on the level of academic quality and the links with research. There is also a great shortage of teachers with the qualifications required for a professorship in the subject. Even so, there are programmes that maintain a high quality. The undergraduate programme at Stockholm University/the Royal Institute of Technology is considered to be first class and the Department of Informatics at Umeå University offers good undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. The University College of Skövde has an excellent research environment but is not entitled to award postgraduate degrees. The University College of Borås provides a good undergraduate programme, cooperates well with other sections of the institution and enjoys dynamic governance.

Even though the subject covers a wide area, it still retains a core of knowledge about the development and applications of information systems. More emphasis is placed on system development than on applications at most higher education institutions, probably because systems scientists and IT specialists mainly work for organisations that supply systems. No programme can provide the skills required to satisfy every need, so the institutions should adopt clearer profiles on the basis of their own specialities than is the case today.

The National Agency queries the entitlement of Växjö University to award master's degrees because the environment cannot adequately offer the critical approach and creativity required. This also means that it lacks satisfactory conditions for the provision of postgraduate programmes.

### **Cultural studies and cultural education – interesting but indistinct innovation**

These programmes, which have their roots in the social sciences and the humanities and whose teachers come from many different disciplines, possess built-in flexibility and openness for theoretical and methodological innovation. At the same time, this has led to lack of clarity about the identity of the subjects and which cultural concept or concepts the programmes focus on. There are no postgraduate programmes in the subjects and the research being undertaken seems mainly to be within the basic disciplines to which its teachers belong.

The programmes in cultural studies at the University College of Trollhättan/Uddevalla and at Göteborg University are presented as good examples in which priority is given to course development by the teachers.

The National Agency queries the entitlement of the University College of Gävle to award bachelor's degrees in cultural education because of the lack of clarity in the content of the programme and the inability of the environment to offer the critical approach and creativity required.

### **Oriental languages – small and vulnerable subjects**

The evaluation of Oriental and African languages, including Middle-Eastern studies, covered 16 subjects. All of them, with the possible exception of Arabic, can be described as extremely small subjects with few students and few teachers, many of them without doctorates. The level of performance is low and there are hardly any programmes that can defray their own costs.

Arabic is a subject that has grown during the last decade. Increasing interest in the Middle East as a political region and for Islam, greater media coverage and easier travel to the region have contributed to this. In the case of African languages, the evaluation poses the question of why Sweden should

offer university courses about Africa and African language at an academic level. The panel of assessors points out that a national policy is needed for future development.

The Middle East comprises a number of different countries, languages and cultures and the interdisciplinary character of Middle Eastern studies spans across a wide range of academic disciplines. Swedish area-study programmes that deal with the Middle East should formulate an explicit profile and establish close cooperation.

The National Agency queries the entitlement to award bachelor's and master's degrees in Hebrew at Göteborg University and in Hindi, Kurdish and Tamil at Uppsala University. The teachers on these programmes are inadequately qualified, i.e. do not have doctorates, and this gives rise to shortcomings in the environment as a whole. For the same reason, satisfactory conditions are lacking for the provision of postgraduate programmes in Semitic at Lund University and in Assyriology, Indology, Iranian languages, comparative Indo-European linguistics, Semitic languages and Turkic languages at Uppsala University.

### **Psychology – many local profiles and one-sided use of method**

This subject has been expanding during the late 1990s and the beginning of this century. Financial conditions vary from institution to institution because differences in the way the subject is classified affect funding and sometimes limit access to laboratories. If local profiles also involve small environments, there is a manifest risk that they will become far too dependent on individuals and thus vulnerable. An extended network of contacts is required to attain greater breadth and reduce dependence. The teaching of scientific methodology focuses, as a rule, on quantitative, statistical methods. Greater integration of the methodology teaching and greater openness for different scientific methodologies is recommended. The range

of courses offered in postgraduate programmes is skimpy in some places and even though postgraduate students can take part in courses at other universities, the further development of national courses for postgraduate students is recommended.

The great majority of the students are women. Few institutions have, however, taken any active measures to recruit more men for this subject. One exception is the University College of Mälardalen, where the proportion of men has also risen between 1999 and 2002.

#### **Certification in psychology – striking a balance between professional and academic requirements**

Programmes leading to certification in psychology, which are offered at seven universities, are organised differently at the different higher education institutions. One result is that it is difficult for students to move from one part of the country to another. Students are also worried about the possibilities provided for their continuation to specialist training. Despite their different therapeutic approaches, the programmes are adjudged as offering equivalent generalist training at all the higher education institutions. The students should, however, be given thorough information about the contents of programmes before making their selections.

A degree in psychology leading to professional certification also provides the academic qualification required for enrolment to postgraduate programmes. This is a difficult balance to strike. The programmes have been designed with the intention of providing various links with professional practice including treating patients, workplace environments, organisational activities, support for young people, mentor programmes involving older colleagues, etc. However, the panel of assessors express the need for stronger links with research at several higher education institutions and for greater openness in the teaching about the various therapeutic approaches.

The gender perspective, which is important in psychology programmes, should also be integrated and problematised in the teaching to a far greater extent than it is today. Lund University is, however, particularly aware of this aspect. The department annually awards a prize for the best third or fourth semester essay with gender perspectives.

#### **Social and cultural anthropology**

##### **– field work in the great wide world**

Anthropology is the study of man as a social and cultural being. It is characteristic of anthropology that, in comparison with most social and humanities sciences, its focus has historically been outside the industrialised world. The evaluation shows that there is a lack of clarity about what kind of employment opportunities these programmes will lead to, and this in turn means that few students dare invest in advanced study in the subject. Substantial improvement of the information about the subject is recommended, and the importance of following up previous students. The universities of Göteborg, Stockholm and Uppsala are good examples of institutions where studies of this kind are undertaken.

The departments/sections should also endeavour to guarantee anthropological methodology, i.e. field work in social environments for some period of time, for instance by assuming greater responsibility for making field work viable, both in terms of time and funding.

#### **Sociology – depth of theory but lack of methodological breadth**

Today, sociology can be characterised as a social science subject which is relevant for all the social science disciplines. The subject was fashioned as a science for and about modern society, but it has not remained unaffected by the cascade of post-modernist theories. This can be seen in the increasing at-



tention paid to gender, ethnic relationships and globalisation in both the teaching and research. Sociology has expanded in recent years and its programmes recruit large and heterogeneous groups of students. This poses new challenges for the teachers when their students lack the prior knowledge required for the courses on offer. The University College of Mälardalen is one institution that has taken this problem seriously. The University Colleges of Borås, Kalmar, Trollhättan/Uddevalla, Mälardalen, Blekinge Institute of Technology and Linköping and Umeå Universities provide good examples of the systematic use of feed-back from course evaluations for use in the development of the institutions' courses.

Straitened finances and the employment of many hourly-paid or substitute teachers have resulted in heavy work loads for the teaching staff. Nevertheless, a high standard is maintained in the teaching of the theory in the subject, while the methodology teaching needs to be broadened to allow more quantitative methods. However, the standard of the teaching of methodology is high at Stockholm University, Umeå University, Luleå University of Technology, Södertörn University College and the University College of Mälardalen.

At many places, there is only little scope for research or research is distributed unevenly, with the exception of Uppsala University and the University College of Kristianstad, which guarantee teachers coherent periods for research within the framework of their posts.

The National Agency queries the entitlement of Dalarna University College to award bachelor's degrees in sociology on the grounds that the breadth and depth of the subject need to be identified and reflected in the syllabus and reading lists, more explicit progression in the teaching of both theory and methodology is required and the links with research should be enhanced. An application from the University College of

Trollhättan/Uddevalla for entitlement to award a master's degree with sociology as a major subject is rejected, as the institution is not considered able to offer satisfactory conditions for the award of this qualification.

#### **Social psychology – conditions for postgraduate education are debated**

Social psychology programmes leading to a master's degree are offered at only three institutions in the country; however courses in social psychology at one or several levels are provided at the undergraduate level at many universities and university colleges. There is no postgraduate provision in the subject, except for the two compulsory courses offered by the University College of Skövde in cooperation with the University of Leiden, the Netherlands, as part of a doctoral programme in social psychology.

A national debate on the conditions for a Swedish postgraduate programme in social psychology has been initiated. The panel of assessors, however, find that there is not yet a sufficiently large basis, nor is the link with research in the subject enough developed to support a doctoral programme. Also, research activities are not sufficiently coherent or comprehensive. Increased Nordic and international cooperation is recommended to strengthen both the teaching and the research environment.

#### **Criminology and the sociology of law – good quality in unique environments**

These subjects form part of unique environments and are also unusual in an international context. Criminology, which is offered at Stockholm University, has characteristically focused on quantitative methodology but in recent years it has extended its methodological arsenal considerably. The section

for the sociology of law at Lund, with its autonomous status, is considered to provide the most viable environment for the sociology of law in the Nordic countries.

#### **Good quality – little to question**

In conclusion, it can be said that the quality of the programmes evaluated in 2003 is on the whole good. After about 200 appraisals, only in 15 cases has entitlement to award degrees been queried and one application to award a master's degree with a major subject rejected. Eight research environments have been considered inadequate, all but one relating to the 'small' languages. In comparison it may be mentioned that in the last three years, 69 entitlements to award degrees have been queried. Experience shows that notification of the withdrawal of the entitlement to award a degree has so far resulted in the implementation of appropriate measures, so that, fortunately, no entitlement has in fact been revoked.

**Evaluation of subjects and  
programmes 2001–2003  
– a mid-term report »**

What have the three years of evaluations revealed? The first section of this report will present reflections about what each of the target groups expected of the evaluations and the observations they have given rise to. It will be followed by a section dealing with what impression Swedish programmes make when seen through the eyes of international assessors. Then the point of view of potential employers will be focused on. An account then follows of the way in which the National Agency has assured the quality of the evaluations and developed the procedures adopted. It concludes with an analysis of the composition of the panels of assessors between 2001 and 2003.

### **Expectations and observations**

The National Agency for Higher Education's evaluations of the quality of subjects and vocational qualifications have three aims:

- To contribute to the quality development of the higher education department or its counterpart (development).
- To assess whether a programme complies with the objectives and provisions of the Higher Education Act and Higher Education Ordinance (monitoring).
- To provide information for students and others involved in choosing programmes (information).

These three distinct aims mean that several target groups can be identified for the evaluations. The students, of course, form one important target group, another consists of the higher education institutions and a third can be found in the Riksdag and the government. The results are also communicated to

the general public – mainly through the media. The impression they are given about the quality of programmes can easily be distorted as it is mainly the negative criticism that attracts attention and less frequently the fact that the majority of programmes maintain high standards.

What expectations have there been of the National Agency's evaluations of quality? What have the reports indicated? Different target groups may share the same expectations and may also be affected by the same observations. For the sake of simplicity, however, this section will deal with each target group separately.

### **Students**

The evaluations aim to raise the quality of programmes. Not the least important aspect from the students' point of view is that they do in fact involve ascertaining that programmes maintain an acceptable standard. Evaluations may lead, when necessary, to the National Agency requiring measures to be taken if quality is considered to be inadequate. The students are also provided with information about the focus, contents and quality of programmes at different higher education institutions.

In recent years the Higher Education Act has been amended to emphasise that students are entitled and required to exert influence and play an active role in the development of their programmes. This finds expression, for instance, to no small extent, in the government bill *Studentinflytande och kvalitetsutveckling i högskolan* (Student influence and quality development in higher education)<sup>14</sup>, the bill in which the National Agency was assigned the task of evaluating all subjects and programmes during a six-year period. When the

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14. Government bill (1999/2000:28), *Studentinflytande och kvalitetsutveckling i högskolan* (Student influence and quality development in higher education).

quality evaluation system was launched, hopes were expressed by student organisations and others that its findings would be summarised in the form of ranking lists of programmes. How has the National Agency dealt with the requests for information from the students? How have the National Agency's quality evaluations helped to safeguard the rights of students and their influence and to augment them?

#### *Student choices*

The model adopted by the National Agency for Higher Education to provide information to students involves no ranking list but offers instead a special web-site called [www.studera.nu](http://www.studera.nu). It contains information not only about the findings of the evaluations but also other factors that can be important when making a choice of what and where to study. This web-site has evolved since the evaluations started and has twice itself been reviewed by external assessors. The results of these reviews show that opinions about the web-site are positive and appreciative.<sup>15</sup> However, the students expressed the desire for more comparative information, preferably in as simple a form as possible. Studera.nu is used intensively. During March 2003, it was visited by about 65,000 individuals.

#### *Student influence – formal and informal*

The evaluation reports show that many students consider that informal influence that functions effectively indicates that they are living in the best of worlds and that formal influence is more or less unnecessary. But it is important to maintain the formal systems as circumstances may change rapidly. Formal influence can always be invoked to provide support for both rights and obligations.

In the reports, it is often pointed out that the course evaluations, which are now compulsory, have become a mere matter of routine for both students and teachers. They then no longer afford the effective ways of influencing and participating in programmes that students both want and are entitled to. At the same time, at many higher education institutions there is great awareness of the importance of course evaluations and serious efforts have been devoted to their development. The National Agency would like to draw attention to examples of good practice and has therefore initiated a specific study that will result in an anthology to be circulated to the higher education institutions during the autumn of 2004.

Another study that has focused particularly on student influence is the follow-up of the Agency's evaluation in 1999/2000 of three specific quality aspects – student influence, gender equality and social and ethnic diversity – intended to determine what changes had taken place subsequently. It was gratifying to be able to ascertain that, generally speaking, the institutions had made serious efforts to promote all three of these quality aspects and that considerable progress had been made since 1999/2000, particularly in the case of social and ethnic diversity. But the work of the institutions on gender equality and student influence had also improved noticeably. Several higher education institutions have now formulated policies and plans of action to deal with student influence at various levels, which means that it is now given greater prominence. Good examples of clear policies and allocation of responsibilities can be found at the Universities of Göteborg, Linköping, Umeå and Uppsala. However, Lund University has made greatest progress and is the source of many of the measures now being introduced to promote student influence,

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15. *Utvärdering av studentsammanfattningarna på studera.nu (2001) (Evaluation of student summaries of studera.nu)* Borell Market Research AB and the National Agency for Higher Education. *Utvärdering av studera.nu (2003) (Evaluation of studera.nu)* GfK Sverige AB.

such as bills of student rights and student barometers. In the case of all three quality aspects, many of the higher education institutions have now attained the same high level as the most outstanding.

#### *Student exchange*

The opportunity to spend some part of a Swedish study programme at a higher education institution abroad can provide valuable experience in addition to enabling students to see their studies in another light. Opportunities for arranging this have also been created through, for example, the Socrates/Erasmus exchange schemes. There is usually a good deal of exchange activity, but in a remarkable number of cases neither students nor teachers avail themselves of the possibilities that exist. It is claimed that a certain lack of interest among students lies behind the failure to arrange exchanges. The teachers' heavy workloads are also said to make it difficult to maintain networks of international contacts.

#### *Undergraduate and postgraduate students as assessors*

The National Agency attaches central importance to the inclusion of both undergraduate and postgraduate students in the panels of assessors. The panels set up by the Agency between 2001 and 2003 have contained both categories of students and a grand total of 109 have participated. During the site visits the panels meet both undergraduate and postgraduate students. Acting as an assessor or involvement in the site visits offers students one way of exerting influence over their programmes.

In order to persuade more undergraduate and postgraduate students to take part in the evaluations, the National Agency has improved its information to the student unions. This information is now mainly provided at the Agency's annual Student Union Day, but from 2004 the information circulated to

the presidents of the higher education institutions about the coming year's evaluations will also be sent to all the student unions.

#### **Higher education institutions and departments**

The evaluations are intended on the one hand to make a contribution to the quality development in the subject, at departments and at higher education institutions and on the other to appraise the actual quality of the programmes offered.

One requirement if a positive development is to be ensured is that the assessors and those evaluated agree about the model adopted and its implementation. Before launching the new quality evaluation model, several conferences were arranged and consultation took place with the higher education institutions. This consultation encompassed both the evaluation model and aspects of quality. One of the advantages the model was expected to offer was a general quality evaluation system that would subject all higher education institutions to the same assessment, unlike earlier approaches when it was mainly the institutions applying for the right to award degrees that had been appraised. The shift from audits of quality assurance procedures to determination of the actual quality of the higher education programmes offered in Sweden also gave rise to some expectations.

#### *Evaluations contribute to the development of quality*

There have been many expressions of appreciation of the *national survey* of the level of quality in a subject provided now that the evaluations include both university colleges, universities and other higher education institutions. One consequence of this is that the evaluations have in many cases led to the creation of national subject councils, networks and cooperation.

The peer assessment included in the model for the quality evaluation system's appraisals has contributed to a mutual exchange of experience.

The evaluation reports also fulfil a function in providing the basis for decisions at different levels: the boards of the higher education institutions, institutional managements, faculties and departments.

The evaluation model itself, with self-evaluation, external appraisal by a panel of assessors that also includes international experts and follow up, together with its aim of determining a minimum level of quality in a programme helps to affirm the legitimacy of the programmes, both nationally and internationally.

During the first year of evaluations criticism was expressed of the time and expense required for the self-evaluation process. This criticism has waned during the last two years. The evaluation process admittedly takes time but many higher education institutions have reported that the self-evaluation process is extremely rewarding and worth the time required. It goes without saying that costs are involved in allocating time for a thorough self-evaluation process and quality development measures. There are good examples of ways in which this can be managed, which the National Agency has drawn attention to previously, with some higher education institutions allotting special funding to the subjects that are about to be evaluated.

Other positive factors mentioned by the higher education institutions, apart from the value of the self-evaluation process, include the benefits of having tested a model for evaluation and quality development. The National Agency's model has provided a concrete example of how evaluations can be implemented. Unlike the quality audits, which mainly concerned the central administrations of the higher education institutions, these evaluations have propagated quality assurance

procedures from central administrative level to departmental level.

#### *The quality of programmes*

The evaluations that have taken place from 2001–2003 reveal that irrespective of the subject or vocational qualification appraised, it has been possible to make many general observations.

The lack of adequate economic resources is referred to in virtually every evaluation report. Here consideration should be taken of the way in which the costs of higher education in Sweden have, on the whole, risen more rapidly than funding. Straitened finances have resulted in burdensome workloads for the teachers and few classroom hours every week for students, which is particularly noticeable in the social sciences and the humanities. This means that the students must assume greater responsibility for their own studies, which can be an advantage provided that the students are given support and help if difficulties arise.

In some rare cases teachers are said to have declared that their working situation is highly acceptable. In most quarters they consider instead that they suffer from understaffing and have difficulty in fulfilling all the demands and expectations made of them. Their own skill enhancement and research often has to take second place to a heavy teaching load and administrative chores. This is exacerbated when many subjects solve their problems by employing a large number of substitute teachers, hourly-paid teachers or teachers without research qualifications. Endeavours to provide the accessibility expected by students also mean that many teachers have less and less time for the development that is required. Despite this, the quality of what they do is generally acknowledged.

The programmes evaluated also show that the terms applying to postgraduate students often vary, and are not always

very satisfactory in the small research environments. With few or no seminars and a very restricted range of courses offered, certain programmes are unable to provide postgraduate students with a critical and creative environment. On the other hand, the graduate schools offer their postgraduate students conditions that are considerably more similar and positive. The follow-up of the 16 graduate schools conducted by the National Agency last year<sup>16</sup> revealed that 79 per cent of the students were able to finance their studies with postgraduate studentships from their first semester, which is considerably more than in the regular postgraduate programmes. At the graduate schools, the students are given assistant supervisors, changing supervisor is less “painful” because of the support provided by the school, the students belong to a larger network and there is greater scope for the development of new courses.

A special study has been made of the endeavours devoted by the higher education institutions to gender equality issues in the follow-up of the evaluation of three quality aspects – student influence, gender equality and social and ethnic diversity – referred to above. A more general pattern emerges from the evaluation reports with more women than men in the earlier stages of programmes and the teaching staff but with more men at the more advanced levels. Great efforts have been made at certain higher education institutions to change this pattern, but more needs to be done, not least in attempting to influence the recruitment base to strike a more even gender balance.

A gender perspective increasingly forms part of many programmes and seems to be becoming even more frequent, but it cannot be taken for granted that all the programmes in the

same subject have introduced this kind of perspective. This applies for instance to psychology, which is surprising given that the students are expected to acquire knowledge of the kind of social and family relationships that influence the conditions of life for women and men.

It is taken for granted that higher education should be international in character. The content of the concept of internationalisation as used in the evaluations almost exclusively refers to the exchange possibilities open to students and teachers and the extent to which works that are not in Swedish are included in reading lists. As has previously been pointed out, exchange takes place to a greater or lesser extent, but the report says little about what is done to derive benefit from the experience. On the other hand, it is sometimes pointed out that there is a fairly miserly attitude to the accreditation of credit points earned abroad. The opposite should apply in view of the valuable experience acquired by the students, which it is important to take advantage of in various ways.

The study that the National Agency has launched on the aspects of internationalisation and cooperation will enrich the content of the concept of internationalisation.

Certain observations are repeated again and again during the three years. They mainly concern the straitened economic situation, teachers’ working conditions, the low number of classroom hours in many places, variations in the conditions for postgraduate students and the many small educational environments, primarily for postgraduate programmes. In order to deal with these problems the higher education institutions are repeatedly advised to profile, cooperate and concentrate to a greater extent.

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16. *16 forskarskolor – statistisk uppföljning av doktoranderna och några resultat om verksamheten (16 graduate schools – statistics about the postgraduate students and some of the results of their activities)* (The National Agency for Higher Education, reg.no. 62-1609-03).



Even though a number of problem areas have been identified in the evaluations and even though the National Agency has in a number of cases queried the entitlement of individual programmes to award degrees, the main impression is that programmes produce good results. A great deal of conscientious effort goes into higher education in Sweden.

### The Riksdag and the government

All three aims, quality development, monitoring and information, are important for politicians and the other decision-makers. For them as well, it is of course important for Swedish education to attain a high standard in an international context.

Sweden more than complies with the requirements so far formulated in the Bologna process for evaluation systems in higher education. There is an all-embracing system of evaluations within a six-year time-frame. The decisions that will have to be made in the next few years in the context of the Bologna process will have major significance for the organisation of a future Swedish evaluation system.

As the system is comprehensive and provides a national survey, it also helps to provide a sound basis for decisions made by the authorities at a central level.

The overall quality evaluation system has provided the National Agency for Higher Education with the information required to enable it to approach the government on issues that are important for the system of higher education..

Are Swedish politicians aware of the quality evaluations? During the last two sessions of the Riksdag, the National Agency's quality evaluations were during debates referred to

on forty separate occasions. The vast majority of these references were made by the Minister of Education, but politicians from all the political parties accounted for the others. Appreciative mention was made of the evaluations by representatives of all the political parties.

The evaluations of subjects and programmes have demonstrated the necessity of profiles, cooperation and concentration. The National Agency has drawn this to the attention of both the government and the higher education institutions. One result is that these issues have now become part of the political agenda. The Agency has also been able to discern increased activity at the institutions to adopt profiles, cooperate and concentrate.

The evaluations have also demonstrated that the current system of allocating resources to both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes is in need of review. The government has now for instance, given the National Agency a greater role to play in the dimensioning process. The National Agency has also written to the government to point out the problems raised by the current system of postgraduate study and research disciplines. Only by being awarded a new discipline for postgraduate study and research can a university college acquire any substantial increase in the funding allocated. In the report from the enquiry into a new degree system that has now been submitted, mention is made of 'fields of knowledge'.<sup>17</sup> However, it is unclear whether and how this is to replace the concept of discipline and, if so, what the consequences would be. Another possible approach would be to create broad profile areas.

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17 Högre utbildning i utveckling. Bolognaprocessen i svensk belysning (Developments in Higher Education. The Bologna Process from a Swedish perspective) (Ds 2004:2).

During 2003, the National Agency for Higher Education undertook, at the behest of the government, an enquiry into the position of what are referred to as the ‘small’ languages.<sup>18</sup> Against the background of the long-standing recognition of the problems faced by the ‘small’ languages in meeting their own costs and offering a study environment that is sufficiently critical and creative, the National Agency proposed a national strategy. In brief, this would require the higher education institutions to apply for national responsibility for a specific language or language area and the resources to go with it. The evaluation of Oriental languages reveals problems like those previously indicated for the classical languages, and further augments the need to establish a national strategy without delay.

### **Foreign assessors on Swedish programmes**

It is important to view higher education in Sweden from an international perspective. For this reason, the panels always include assessors from abroad, mainly from the Nordic countries for language reasons. Their task is to contribute their experiences and to make appraisals on the basis of their conception of the quality of corresponding programmes in the countries from which they come. Some conclusions are presented below that are based on the statements of the foreign assessors in the reports.

### **Swedish higher education comes out well**

The first thing to be pointed out is that in most cases there is no difference between the impressions of the foreign assessors and their Swedish counterparts. This may be due to the at-

tention paid in the National Agency’s introductory training sessions to describing and explaining the Swedish system of higher education and in placing the specific programmes in their Swedish context. It is also linked to the fact that higher education is by very nature international. The opinions of the foreign assessors confirm that, given their context and premises, Swedish programmes stand up well to comparison. The criticisms voiced concern structural differences between Sweden and other countries. This applies not least to the length of programmes, and above all to the extent of the studies in a subject at undergraduate level.

### **Structural differences**

In a number of reports it is indicated that Swedish undergraduate programmes are shorter and more superficial than their counterparts in other (mainly Nordic) countries. This applies both to the duration of entire programmes that lead to the award of a qualification, and also to the breadth of study in the major subjects. This observation is made about classical languages, Egyptology, economics and business administration and also about media and communication studies. This difference is likely to diminish or disappear if Sweden shifts to a European system with a three-year bachelor’s degree and a master’s degree that requires an additional one or two years.

The assessors of the programmes that award three-year engineering qualifications comment on the lack of clarity that prevails about the difference between the diploma and degree programmes in this area. In many countries the differences between the two are considerably more explicit, mainly because the degree programmes are offered at universities while diplomas are awarded after shorter tertiary programmes at

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18. *Att vara eller inte vara? Frågan om småspråkens framtid i den svenska högskolan – ett regeringsuppdrag. (To be or not to be? The future of small languages in higher education in Sweden – a government commission)* (National Agency for Higher Education, reg.no 12-2408-02).

specialised colleges. This applies to Denmark, Finland and Norway, for instance. In the evaluation report it is pointed out that one advantage of the more uniform system in Sweden is that greater demands can be made of the teacher's academic qualifications and in-service training.

Several evaluations refer to the quality assurance provided by the system of external examiners in Denmark and Norway. A corresponding system exists in the United Kingdom and a few other countries. Similar attempts have been made on a small scale in Sweden, mainly in connection with essays and degree projects.

The length and quality of Swedish postgraduate programmes correspond to those of other countries according to international assessors. For instance, in the evaluation of chemistry it is stated that Sweden's postgraduate programmes in this subject have a good reputation internationally and that leading universities in other countries are more than willing to appoint Swedes to post-doctoral posts and that foreign postgraduate students are keen on studying in Sweden. In the evaluation of mathematics the standards required of doctoral theses are considered to be higher than in many other countries. The postgraduate programmes offered by the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences are also commended. However, not every subject is appraised as positively. The panel evaluating economics consider that the standard of doctoral theses in Sweden is lower than in Norway and Denmark. This means that a Swedish PhD in this subject is less well prepared for an academic career.

#### **Teaching staff**

The foreign assessors comment in particular on the working conditions for teaching staff. The restricted scope for research

provided within their appointments for permanently employed teachers surprises many of them. These observations apply to senior lecturers and professors, in particular those who have been promoted to professorships.

#### **Students' prior knowledge, teaching and the content of programmes**

Shortcomings in the prior knowledge of students of mathematics and languages are noted but it is pointed out that comparable circumstances prevail in other countries. Where the study of languages is concerned, Denmark and Norway have introduced obligatory introductory courses in general linguistics and grammar to provide all language students with the same basic knowledge.

In some subjects, among them business administration, it is claimed that students in Norway, for instance, receive considerably more teaching, measured in terms of hours per week. Much of this is given in the form of lectures with much greater participation of the professors than is the case in Sweden, which may help to strengthen the links with research. In the corresponding subjects in Sweden there is more small-group teaching, so that students are offered fewer teaching hours per week but greater scope is provided for dialogue and student participation.

Some differences in the content of certain programmes are described. For example less mathematics and statistics are demanded in both economics and business administration than in many other countries. It is claimed that one outcome is, for instance, the weaker position of econometrics as an element in economics programmes in Sweden, which can mean that those with a Swedish qualification in economics may find it more difficult to find international employment.

## **The labour market perspective**

One of the perspectives adopted in the evaluation of subjects and programmes is that of the labour market. The National Agency attempts to incorporate this perspective in a number of ways. What has this added to the evaluations and what is said in the reports about the links between programmes and the labour market?

All of the panels of assessors appraising programmes that lead to the award of a vocational qualification have contained representatives of the labour market. As many as eleven were involved in the evaluation of the diploma programmes in engineering. There have also been labour market representatives in several of the subject evaluations. Altogether, 27 representatives of the labour market outside higher education have been included in the panels of assessors between 2001 and 2003.

Another way of taking into account the views of the labour market has been to invite potential employers to the feed-back conferences that conclude each evaluation. They have been represented at several of these conferences. The National Agency has extremely positive experience of discussing working-life issues at these feed-back conferences.

The representatives of future employers have in many cases played an important role, not least for the credibility of the evaluations. One experience is that they have also been able to provide a more balanced impression. A number of these representatives have emphasised the importance of the provision of general training in higher education rather than programmes that are too highly specialised. Specialisation should instead be provided by the labour market. In some cases the labour market representatives have paid particular attention to the scope provided for students to acquire workplace experience.

Experience has shown that it can often be difficult to recruit representatives of potential employers to the panels of assessors, especially from the private sector. In an evalua-

tion currently taking place of the local personnel and labour market programmes, a special hearing is being arranged with labour market representatives, in other words there is a possibility of tapping the experiences of several people rather than one or two representatives in a panel of assessors. This will also be tested in other evaluations.

## **What is said about the links between programmes and the labour market?**

Most of the reports contain some discussion of the labour market that graduates are likely to encounter. It goes without saying that vocational programmes have more direct links with the labour market and that this aspect is therefore dealt with more consistently and more explicitly than in the other evaluation reports. Above all, this applies to the evaluations of computer science, diploma programmes in engineering, social work and specialist translation, which raise questions concerning cooperation with industry/future employers in the choice and implementation of degree projects and in work placement. The same is true of the discussion of the programme for language consultants in connection with the evaluation of Nordic languages. It is pointed out that work experience is a vital part of the programme and that the higher education institutions must make every endeavour to ensure that it can in fact be provided. It is necessary for practical and theoretical courses to enrich each other. This is not always the case.

The panels that have evaluated the vocational programmes also raise the issue of academic freedom in connection with postgraduate programmes involving cooperation with industry or with other forms of external funding of research. To what extent may research findings be kept secret, for instance?

One important feature that can yield some impression of the degree of concern about the reactions of future employers to programmes is the extent to which the departments/higher

education institutions try to find out what previous students think about their programmes in relation to their employment after graduation. What benefits have they provided? It should be equally natural to try to find out from the employers how they have been able to benefit from the knowledge and skills of the students in the workplace. Studies of both kinds have been undertaken systematically at a central level at Lund University. Uppsala University also has a central unit that carries out similar follow-up studies in direct connection with the National Agency's six-year cycle of evaluations of subjects and programmes. During 2003, the Agency conducted a questionnaire survey to determine the extent to which the higher education institutions monitor what happens to their graduates.<sup>19</sup> This reveals that a great deal is being done but that in only a few places is the work systematic. Students who have completed vocationally oriented programmes, in particular engineers, economists and nurses are monitored more than others. The findings are used, for instance, in marketing the programmes.

Finally, it must never be forgotten that higher education itself is one of the beneficiaries of vocational training. Sometimes it is said that there is a risk that insufficient prominence will be given to the knowledge and skills required for enrolment to postgraduate programmes, to the disadvantage of students who have completed vocationally oriented programmes. It is important to avoid this, both for the sake of the students and the postgraduate programmes.

## **Quality assurance of the evaluations of subjects and programmes**

From the first inception of the evaluations of subjects and programmes, the National Agency has taken great pains to assure the quality of the evaluation process. The Agency is of course aware of the difficulties involved in such a comprehensive undertaking, both for the higher education institutions and the Agency itself. Criticisms and commendations have been taken with the utmost seriousness and they have been used to improve the process as much as possible. Quality assurance takes different forms. Sometimes it involves measures that were planned from the outset, others derive from scrutiny of various aspects of the process while the work is under way.

### **International Advisory Board**

An International Advisory Board was appointed as early as in 2001 and it has monitored the Agency's implementation of the quality evaluations continuously. This board consists of five internationally recognised researchers in the field of evaluation.<sup>20</sup> The Board not only bases its discussions on the evaluation reports but also on discussions with members of the staff of the National Agency. The Board has accounted for its observations and recommendations in three reports.<sup>21</sup> Points raised by the Board include the risk of standardisation, the instructions for the self-evaluations and the importance of more appraisals of specific aspects of quality. The National Agency studies all of the recommendations made by the Board.

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19. *Uppföljning av studenter. En rapport från Högskoleverkets arbetsmarknadsprogram 2003 (Graduate follow-up – what higher education institutions do. A report from the National Agency's labour market programme 2003)* (National Agency for Higher Education report 2004:5 R).

20. Its members are Martin Trow, Center for Studies in Higher Education, Berkeley (chair); Mary Henkel, Brunel University; Ernie House, University of Colorado at Boulder; Guy Neave, CHEPS (Center For Higher Education Policy Studies, Nederländerna) and the International Association of Universities and Bente Kristensen, Copenhagen Business School.

21. See *References* for the reports of the Advisory Board.

### Studies for quality assurance purposes

In addition to its discussions with the Advisory Board and the reports it produces, the National Agency has initiated a number of major studies of how the actual evaluation model functions. In the first of these studies, a number of researchers analysed the way in which the evaluation model worked using, for instance, questionnaires sent to the higher education institutions and the panels of assessors.<sup>22</sup> In another study attention was focused on what the results were intended for and the significance of various aspects of the evaluation model.<sup>23</sup> Yet another study involved an external evaluation of the National Agency's evaluations department i.e. the department responsible for the evaluations of subjects and programmes.<sup>24</sup>

### Seminars and consultation

In order to obtain further points of view on its quality evaluation procedures, the National Agency has arranged an annual conference for those responsible for quality assurance at the higher education institutions. They have also been asked to respond to a number of questions on the impact of the new quality evaluation system on the way in which the institutions deal with quality issues. Seminars on the evaluations have been held with the presidents of the higher education institutions, arranged for instance by the Association of Swedish Higher Education (SUHF). In 2004 a special study of the attitudes of the presidents to the evaluations will be made. Continuous consultation also takes place with the higher

education institutions and departments before the beginning of the evaluation in any year. The quality conference regularly arranged by the National Agency in collaboration with one of the higher education institutions also provides opportunities to discuss the quality evaluations.

### Counteracting standardisation

One example of the way in which the National Agency has endeavoured to develop evaluation procedures and assure their quality can be found in the question of the risk that the evaluations would have a negative impact and lead to standardisation of the content of programmes. The higher education institutions had raised this issue during the consultations preceding the introduction of the new quality evaluation system and the Advisory Board had also warned of these risks. Right from the start, therefore, the Agency was aware of the possibility. At the same time it should be pointed out that the element of monitoring in the evaluations, i.e. the appraisal of what constitutes a minimum level of acceptability, is needed to guarantee equivalence. From this point of view, standardisation does not have to be negative but may provide a guarantee that the programmes offered to students are of acceptable quality and enable continued study at other higher education institutions than their own.

A variety of methods have been adopted to prevent negative standardisation. One is to involve international assessors, another is to focus on examples of good practice. Yet another

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22. Karlsson, O., Andersson, I. M. och Lundin, A., *Metautvärdering av Höskoleverkets modell för kvalitetsbedömning av högre utbildning. Hur har lärosäten och bedömare uppfattat modellen?* (A metaevaluation of the National Agency's model for quality appraisal in higher education. What view is taken of the model by the higher education institutions and the assessors) (National Agency for Higher Education report 2002:20 R).

23. Nilsson, K.-A., *Enklare och nyttigare? Om metodiken för ämnes- och programutvärderingar. (Simpler and more useful? On methods of evaluating subjects and programmes)* (National Agency for Higher Education report 2003:17 R).

24. Sandahl, R., Rohlin, M. and Waerness, M., *Utvärderare sökes? Några reflektioner kring Höskoleverkets utvärderingsavdelning. (Evaluators wanted? – Some reflections on the National Agency's Evaluations Department)* (National Agency for Higher Education reg.no. 20-2242-03).

way of reducing the risk of standardisation is to vary the ways in which the evaluations are carried out. One example is to arrange hearings with the students and potential employers and to replace the site visits with dialogue meetings between the panel and several higher education institutions at the same time. More attempts to vary implementation will also be made in the future.

### The assessors

From the very beginning, the National Agency established a number of criteria for the composition of the panels of assessors. They were to consist of subject experts and undergraduate and postgraduate students. For evaluations of programmes leading to a vocational qualification, the panels were also to include labour market representatives. When evaluating other programmes that do not lead to a vocational qualification, representation by potential employers is also useful. The panels should be able to draw on international expertise. The subject experts were required to have a scholarly or artistic reputation and command professional respect, teaching expertise, legitimacy in the sector and personal integrity. The panels of assessors are appointed by the National Agency on the basis of recommendations and consultation with the programmes to be evaluated.

Every year, the National Agency analyses the composition of the panels of assessors. Using these analyses, it is possible to set up panels of assessors in more varied ways. How have the panels been composed? How many assessors have been involved in the National Agency's evaluations?

During the last three years, 330 assessors have taken part in the National Agency's panels of assessors. Of them 125 (38 per cent) were women. A great deal of effort has gone into re-

cruiting more women as subject experts for the panels. Here, however, the Agency shares a widespread experience, which is that women professors and senior lecturers are overworked and much sought after for extra assignments.

Table 2: Composition of panels of assessors 2001–2003 (total).

Subject experts	194
Undergraduate and postgraduate students	109
Labour market	27
<b>Total number of assessors</b>	<b>330</b>

### International assessors

Of the assessors, 121 come from outside Sweden. If we exclude the student and labour market representatives, who are in principle always Swedish, the proportion of foreign assessors during the three years has been about 60 per cent. The Nordic countries account for the largest proportion, but assessors have also been recruited from the United Kingdom, Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Northern Ireland and Lithuania. During the years these foreign assessors have come from a total of 38 different higher education institutions.

### Undergraduate and postgraduate students

A total of 48 postgraduate and 61 undergraduate students have participated in the panels of assessors. The National Agency has extremely positive experiences of the contributions made by these students to the work of the panels. In order to find out more about what they felt about their task, the Agency has arranged special seminars for undergraduate and postgraduate assessors. They have had a positive opinion of their role and good experiences. As assessors they have in some cases considered the programmes in their entirety, like their fellow assessors, and in others concentrated solely on student issues. The

students feel that they have enjoyed the respect of the panels but not always, on the other hand, of the higher education institutions to which they have made site visits.

To provide the undergraduate and postgraduate students with even more support in their role as assessors the National Agency intends to arrange seminars for all the student assessors involved in the current evaluations.



**To be continued »**

The evaluations for 2004 are under way and planning has begun for 2005. Follow-up of the evaluations that have already been published is starting and will provide information about their impact. Among the projects undertaken by the National Agency during 2004 the following can be mentioned: a collection of examples of good practice in dealing with course evaluations at higher education institutions, an appraisal of cooperation and internationalisation as two aspects of quality, and a study of the way in which presidents view evaluations. During the final year of the six-year cycle, in addition to the regular evaluations, it is also intended to appraise a few interdisciplinary environments and the Net University. A survey of the conditions applying to postgraduate students in the Nordic countries is being planned. New approaches will also be tested within the framework that has already been established, for instance by attempting to encourage international assessors to make more comparisons and to give potential employers scope to express their opinions in more ways than at present.

The work of the joint European network ENQA can be expected to intensify during the coming year as the Bologna process evolves. Evaluation is going to be one important aspect of this work and the National Agency will take an even more active part so that it can make its contribution.

The imminence of a new degree system and the Bologna process will mean that the focus of quality evaluations will require review and consultation with those involved before the next round starts in 2007.

In this context, it is also necessary to bear in mind the experiences of quality assurance that have been acquired in other countries in recent years. Some of these have been accounted for in a section above. The continued planning process should involve cooperation both within the framework of ENQA and with individual countries in order to improve the Swedish system of evaluation even further.

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The National Agency for Higher Education (Högskoleverket) is a central authority that deals with issues concerning Swedish universities and other institutions of higher education. The Agency's tasks involve quality reviews, the supervision, monitoring and development of higher education, producing reports and analyses, evaluation of foreign qualifications and the provision of information for students.

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