

A system review

A summary analysis of the national system
for quality assurance 2017–2022



A system review. A summary analysis of the national system for quality assurance 2017–2022
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Summary

This report summarises the results and experiences from the Swedish Higher Education Authority's (UKÄ) national system for quality assurance for the 2017–2022 cycle. The aim is also to present the effects of the reviews, and to clarify the background to the methodological choices and changes that are now being made ahead of future reviews. At the same time, the report constitutes UKÄ's debriefing of the government for 2022.

UKÄ's quality assurance system is made up of four components: institutional reviews of programmes and research, programme evaluations, appraisals of degree awarding powers and thematic evaluations. UKÄ's and HEIs' joint responsibility for the quality assurance of higher education and research are central to the quality assurance system. The method rests on peer reviews, with assessors appointed by UKÄ but nominated by HEIs, the Swedish National Union of Students and employer and labour market stakeholder organisations. As in UKÄ's previous system, the assessments include whether the HEIs ensure that students have achieved the national qualitative targets when they take their exams.

Most of the HEIs were approved with reservations in the institutional reviews of programmes

During this cycle, a total of 42 periodic reviews of HEIs' quality assurance processes for programmes were decided on. Out of these, 9 HEIs (21%) were found to have approved quality assurance processes, 29 (69%) were approved with reservations, and 4 HEIs (10%) were given an overall assessment of quality assurance processes under review.

HEI quality systems under development

At the start of the cycle, it became apparent that in many cases the HEIs were working on the development of their quality systems for programmes, which means that not all of the systems' parts had been tested in practice at the time of the review. Self-initiated programme evaluations had also not yet been launched. The results indicate a clear development during the cycle, however. On the other hand, many (17) HEIs did not meet the assessment criterion relating to the development of programmes by drawing on continuous follow-ups, in which course evaluations are included, and periodic reviews. The assessors state that programme improvement actions need to be developed. The assessment areas Prerequisites and Working Life and collaboration were the areas most often found to be satisfactory.

Quality assurance of research – a new task for UKÄ

In 2017, UKÄ's government instructions were changed, and it was given responsibility for the quality assurance not only of programmes, but of all the activities of universities and university colleges. During the cycle, a pilot review was carried out, and a round of periodic reviews of higher education institutions' quality assurance of research. Although the development of quality assurance processes for research is a new activity for HEIs, the reviews show that the majority of the HEIs have a mostly well-functioning quality system for research as well. Most of them ensure that they continuously follow-up, analyse and use information that has a bearing on research quality and relevance. All the HEIs also systematically work to promote good research practice and to prevent and manage research-related misconduct. The areas in need of improvement that the assessment teams identified differ between reviews.

Many programmes leading to teaching and specialist nursing qualifications were given the assessment *under review*

A total of 225 first-cycle and second-cycle vocational programmes were evaluated. The majority lead to various teaching or specialist nursing qualifications. Of the programmes assessed, 126 (56%) were found to be of a high quality and 99 (44%) were given the assessment *under review*. The Student perspective and Working life and collaboration assessment areas were the areas most often found to be satisfactory, and also Prerequisites in the majority of cases. Design, teaching/learning and outcomes were the assessment areas that were the most often found to be unsatisfactory. The most common shortcomings related to the ensuring of the achievement of qualitative targets and the number of teachers with relevant expertise.

Third-cycle programmes were generally high quality, but a fourth were given the assessment *under review*

153 third-cycle programmes were evaluated. A total of 39 (26%) of the programmes were given the assessment *under review*. There was a large variation in the outcomes for different subjects, but some trends can be seen in the data. Small educational environments with a limited range of courses and a lack of supervisors are over-represented in the programmes *under review*. The assessment criterion that doctoral students should gain a broad knowledge and understanding of their subject was decisive in many evaluations. The assessment of the perspectives rarely results in a programme being assessed as *under review*.

The addressing of shortcomings by HEIs

Follow-ups of both institutional reviews and programme evaluations show that the shortcomings are being addressed in most cases. 18

institutional reviews have so far been followed up, including 2 relating to research. The most common actions that the HEIs reported were producing or updating policy documents and procedures, making changes to management structures and meeting formats and improving communication. Other common actions related to improving follow-ups and evaluations. At first-cycle and second-cycle level, only teacher training programmes were able to be followed up. The actions in this area include working on constructive alignment and progression and increasing the number of teachers with relevant expertise. At third-cycle level, thirteen programmes were discontinued by the HEIs themselves and one degree-awarding authorisation was withdrawn. Actions include hiring more teachers/supervisors and expanding the educational environment for doctoral students.

Many applications for degree-awarding powers for dental hygienist, doctor and healthcare counsellor training programmes

Three new dental hygienist, doctor and healthcare counsellor training programmes led to many applications for degree-awarding powers. During the cycle, UKÄ processed 85 applications, of which 31 applications from independent healthcare providers and the remaining 54 from state HEIs. In total, 36 applications were rejected (42%) and 49 (58%) were approved. Independent higher education providers were rejected to a greater extent than state HEIs. Shortcomings in the achievement of qualitative targets assessment criterion generally led to the most rejections. Many applications were also rejected due to shortcomings in the assessment criteria relating to the number of teachers with relevant expertise.

Three thematic evaluations

Three thematic evaluations were conducted during the cycle. The purpose of these evaluations is above all development, and they do not lead to any sanctions for universities and university colleges. The evaluation of sustainable development showed, for example, that only around half of the HEIs had introduced HEI-wide sustainable development targets. The evaluation of widening participation showed that most of the HEIs had interpreted the assignment to mean the active promotion of widening participation according to their own prerequisites based on groups that were under-represented at the HEIs, but also that there is a lack of systematic follow-up and in-depth analyses of HEIs' actions towards widening participation. The evaluation of nursing qualifications showed that ensuring sufficient expertise was a challenge common to all the HEIs, and ensuring a sufficient number of clinical placements.

The achievement of qualitative targets was a challenge with regard to several components

Globally speaking, the achievement of qualitative targets was a common challenge identified in both programme evaluations and appraisals of degree-awarding powers. To some extent, this is connected with the shortage of academic expertise for the programmes evaluated. At the same time, in a number of cases the institutional reviews showed that the conducting of self-evaluations of programmes hadn't come far enough for their assessment to be possible, or that there were shortcomings with regard to programme improvement actions.

UKÄ's renewed membership of ENQA

An external review by ENQA (*European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education*) showed that UKÄ meets the ESG (*European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the Higher Education Area*). UKÄ was therefore able to become a member of the organisation again. During the cycle, UKÄ significantly increased its international activities. ENQA membership also gives Sweden more of an opportunity to influence developments in the European higher education area. In January 2023, the agency also became a member of CoARA (*Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment*).

UKÄ's reviews are quality enhancing but should be more targeted and flexible, and less resource intensive

Overall, the external evaluations – by ENQA and Faugert & Co Utvärdering – and internal follow-ups show that UKÄ's reviews are quality enhancing, but they are too resource intensive. The methodological work that UKÄ began in 2021 for future reviews is based on making the reviews more targeted and flexible, and less onerous for HEIs, assessors and UKÄ.

Introduction

Purpose and background

The Swedish Higher Education Authority's (UKÄ) current national system for the quality assurance of higher education was introduced in 2016 with pilot reviews, and the cycle will end once decisions have been made on the last of the reviews that were started in 2022¹. After the cycle of periodic reviews for 2017–2022, UKÄ's reviews will continue in modified form. The changes made ahead of future reviews should be seen as adjustments to the method applied during the last cycle rather than a new system. This report summarises the experiences from the cycle, and is a kind of stocktaking exercise covering not just the reviews, but also the ongoing continuous improvement work that has led to the adjustments now being made ahead of future reviews.

UKÄ's and HEIs' joint responsibility for the quality assurance of higher education and research are central to the quality assurance system. Reviews of the quality assurance of programmes are governed by the Higher Education Act (1992:1434), the Higher Education Ordinance (1993:100) and the European principles for the quality assurance of higher education, the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG, 2015)².

In 2017, UKÄ's government instructions were changed, and it was given responsibility for the quality assurance not only of programmes, but of all the activities of universities and university colleges³. Agreed national and international frameworks and guidelines for research play an important role as starting points for the reviewing of HEIs' quality assurance processes for research, in addition to the Higher Education Act and Higher Education Ordinance. The international guidelines for the reviewing of the quality assurance of research that are particularly relevant are the *European Charter for Researchers* and the *Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers* (Charter and Code of Conduct)⁴. In Sweden, the Association of Swedish Higher Education Institutions (SUHF) has also developed a national framework including

¹ A pilot evaluation of third-cycle programmes was already launched in 2015. Learn more in the section on evaluations of third-cycle programmes.

² For a summary of the previous cycle, see *En genomgång av effekterna av det nationella utvärderingssystemet 2011–2014*. Swedish Higher Education Authority report series 2015:21.

³ The changes were announced in bill 2016/17:50 *Kunskap i samverkan – för samhällets utmaningar och stärkt konkurrenskraft*. Page 25 states that "The government intends to also task the authority with responsibility for the quality assurance of research. A more coherent system for quality assurance, which includes university colleges' activities as a whole, is deemed to be able to contribute to a stronger relationship between research and training programmes."

⁴ The Charter and Code of Conduct are supported by the European Commission and have a direct bearing on policy issues relating to research and research policies at national level throughout the European area.

global principles for the quality assurance of research.⁵ The framework was significant for the formulation of assessment criteria for the reviewing of HEIs' quality assurance processes for research.⁶

The method rests on peer reviews, with assessors appointed by UKÄ but nominated by HEIs, the Swedish National Union of Students and employer and labour market stakeholder organisations. As in UKÄ's previous system, the assessments include whether the HEIs ensure that students have achieved the national qualitative targets when they take their exams.

The report serves several purposes. The aim is to give readers an overview of the HEIs' strengths and areas in need of improvement by *summarising the main characteristics of the outcomes* for the different review components. The outcomes may also *show the effects of the reviews* in the form of the actions taken by HEIs to address the shortcomings that they identify. However, in this regard it is intended to also summarise what worked well and what might be developed when it comes to the method used for the national quality assurance system. In this way we can *clarify the background to the methodological choices and changes made* ahead of future reviews that will take place after the end of the 2017–2022 cycle.

According to the authority's government instructions, every year UKÄ must report on how quality assurance has contributed to the development of quality and high quality in the activities of universities and university colleges. UKÄ interprets this as meaning that we must report on the effects of reviews. The first report was published in 2019 and covered the third-cycle programmes evaluated⁷. Other reports have covered all of the system's components. This report is UKÄ's government debriefing for 2022, as well as a review of the whole cycle.

Assessment basis

The report is based on the outcomes of the reviews, internal analyses and external evaluations of the system as a whole. Feedback from stakeholders, including in the form of survey responses, is also part of the assessment basis. This approach based on reporting results from different sources can hopefully provide a comprehensive basis for discussion of the effects of the reviews. We therefore refer in the report to different kinds of part studies and describe the method used.

⁵ The Association of Swedish Higher Education Institutions, *Gemensamt ramverk för lärosätenas kvalitetssäkring och kvalitetsutveckling av forskning*. 2019, ISBN: 978-91-983359-7-2.

⁶ The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Vägledning för granskning av lärosätenas kvalitetssäkringsarbete – avseende forskning*. Report 2019:13.

⁷ The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Granskning för utveckling, utvärdering av 95 utbildningar på forskarnivå 2017–2018*. Report 2019:1.

The effects of the reviews may also include short- and long-term actions taken by the HEIs reviewed. An example of a short-term action may, for example, be HEIs taking steps to address shortcomings raised in an ongoing evaluation. HEIs usually have one or two years to address them, depending on the review component. For appraisals of degree-awarding powers, HEIs may be given more time for appraisals and be allowed to address shortcomings within the six months before a decision is made. Work on improving internal quality assurance systems is, however, an action that takes a relatively long time to develop. In an external evaluation by Faugert & Co Utvärdering of the quality assurance system there is a discussion of the effects of the reviews over the short and the long term based on the theory of change (see the figure below). We will outline the potential effects of the reviews over the short and long term in this report, including those observed by Faugert & Co Utvärdering.

Figure 1. Theory of change applied to the quality assurance system.⁸



Approach and format

To set the quality assurance system in its historical context, the report starts with a brief overview of the development of the national system for the quality assurance of higher education in Sweden and the main reforms that paved the way for the current system. HEIs' increased autonomy and the Bologna Process naturally play a conclusive role in the above.

After the history section, the government's official communication from 2015 is briefly presented. UKÄ was tasked by the government with further developing and introducing the system through these instructions. A summary of the key elements of UKÄ's reporting in the report *Nationellt system för kvalitetssäkring av högre utbildning – redovisning av ett regeringsuppdrag* also presents the system's main constituent parts. This becomes a starting point for the reading of the rest of this report.

This is followed by a chapter that describes the outcomes of the reviews. The chapter is divided into four sections in line with the system's four

⁸ Faugert & Co Utvärdering, *Utvärdering av nationellt system för kvalitetssäkring av högre utbildning. Analys av pågående cykel 2017–2022*. Technopolis group 2020, page 16.

components: institutional reviews, programme evaluations, appraisals of degree-awarding powers and thematic evaluations. For each component, the number and type of the reviews and the outcomes are presented. The report shows, among other things, the assessment areas for which the outcomes were positive, and the areas judged to be in need of improvement. The effects that the quality assurance system has had on HEIs' development work can be seen from the assessors' assessments and recommendations and HEIs' reports on the related actions taken.

In the subsequent chapter there is a shift of focus to a review of the quality assurance system as such. The system was continuously followed up during the cycle, through surveys of both HEI representatives and the assessors who took part in the reviews⁹. Feedback conferences provided in-depth feedback to both UKÄ and the HEIs reviewed. Based on the above and follow-ups in the form of mapping, analyses and reflection reports produced as a continuous part of the development work we highlighted the key conclusions. In this way we were also able to identify the system's areas in need of improvement, and the areas that the system was unable to cover particularly well. An example of follow-up would be analyses of how the three perspectives were dealt with in the reviews. Another form of follow-up of the review methods was UKÄ's continuous dialogue with its stakeholders, not least through regular meetings with the two reference groups: one for employer representatives and one for representatives from SUHF and SFS. During the period, UKÄ also had an international advisory group that gave feedback on issues regarding the various review activities.

UKÄ and its quality assurance system also underwent two external evaluations during the cycle, by Faugert & Co Utvärdering and ENQA, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. These are summarised in the penultimate chapter, in which we also describe the international collaboration that has developed and been significantly reinforced relative to the quality assurance system during the previous cycle.

The last chapter summarises the starting points for the method development that UKÄ initiated in 2021 ahead of future reviews taking place after the end of the 2017–2022 cycle. Finally, we also reflect on what emerged from the data underlying this report, in light of UKÄ's and HEIs' joint responsibility for quality assurance.

⁹ The report only includes the HEIs' responses, however, as it is the surveys sent to them that contain the question about whether the reviews were quality enhancing.

The history of national quality assurance of higher education in Sweden

This chapter briefly describes the development of national quality assurance of higher education in Sweden, i.e. it gives an overview of the different quality assurance systems that we have had before the current version. The chapter also presents the main reforms in the higher education area that have affected the development of quality assurance.

The launching of the national quality assurance system as a result of the 1993 higher education reforms

From a European perspective, Sweden introduced national quality assurance of higher education relatively early¹⁰. Subjects and research in the higher education area were already evaluated, but a national system was first introduced as a result of the higher education reforms of 1993, in connection with a transition from rules-based governance to objective- and results-based governance within the sector. HEIs had to take greater responsibility for quality in their own activities¹¹, but this would be combined with quality follow-ups. The bill that paved the way for this development was known as *Frihet för kvalitet* (Freedom for quality).¹² Then Minister Per Unckel wrote in this regard that:

Free universities and university colleges are in the best position to provide a high-quality education. The advanced expansion of knowledge requires freedom, independence and competition. [...] This is the reason for the government's efforts to find ways to increase the freedom of large parts of the higher education and research sector from the current direct state control.¹³

Increasing internationalisation was also put forward as a reason for the desired development.

¹⁰ France, the UK, Denmark and the Netherlands were ahead of Sweden and already had national review systems. In the Netherlands and Denmark the focus was on evaluating subjects and programmes, whereas in France and the UK it was on HEIs as a whole. See Staffan Wahlén's *Från granskning och bedömning av kvalitetsarbete till utvärdering av utbildningsresultat – ger utvärderingen en bild av kvaliteten på utbildningen vid universitet och högskolor?* The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, report series 2012:21 R, page 5.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Bill 1992/93:1, *om universitet och högskolor – frihet för kvalitet*.

¹³ Ibid, pages 9–10.

To an increasing extent we will be living in an international environment where academic expertise is vital for our country's prosperity. Sweden's geographically peripheral location, our language and our relatively small population mean that we can't make do with just being good. We must set our sights higher.¹⁴

As part of the shift towards increased freedom for HEIs, a new resource allocation system was also introduced, which was based to a large degree on students' results, i.e. the number of credits awarded. The incentive to perform quantitatively also made it important to ensure that the quality of programmes was maintained and developed through evaluations. A new authority, the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (HSV), was created in 1995 for this purpose, with the task of both reviewing and promoting quality.¹⁵

Enhancement-oriented institutional reviews attract interest

Between 1995 and 2001, the national quality assurance system mainly consisted of development-focused institutional reviews. Two rounds of reviews of all university colleges and universities were completed¹⁶. Right from the start, the model was similar to the current version in several respects, with assessment panels, self-evaluations, site visits and reports with recommendations, as well as feedback meetings and follow-up. In addition to academic experts, the assessment panels for institutional reviews included a student representative and an employer and labour market representative.

Appraisals of degree-awarding powers were introduced somewhat earlier than institutional reviews¹⁷. State university colleges, which generally had bachelor's degree-awarding powers, could develop their activities by applying for authorisation to award other types of degrees, such as master's degrees and professional qualifications. Just like now, the focus was on assessing quality with regard to HEIs' prerequisites for awarding certain qualifications. For a period starting from 1998, it also became possible for university colleges to apply to become universities, which led to the university colleges of Karlstad, Växjö and Örebro and Mithögskolan gaining university status. Out of the applications from the four university colleges, the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education only found the application from the university college of Karlstad to be warranted, but the government made a different

¹⁴ Ibid. s

¹⁵ Wahlén Staffan, *Från granskning och bedömning av kvalitetsarbete till utvärdering av utbildningsresultat*. The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, report series 2012:21 R, pages 5–6.

¹⁶ Ibid, page 10.

¹⁷ Independent higher education providers were allowed to apply to the government for degree-awarding powers from 1993. In these cases, the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education acted as a consultative body.

assessment¹⁸. University colleges could also apply to operate in new academic areas, which conferred the right to offer third-cycle programmes in the approved area.¹⁹

In addition to the appraisals of degree-awarding powers and institutional reviews carried out during the period, some programme and subject evaluations were carried out. The reason for this was either that they were not of particular interest or were seen as problematic.²⁰

The Swedish model for institutional reviews attracted interest internationally due to its development-focused approach. The focus in countries such as the UK and the Netherlands was more on monitoring. However, when it comes to creating a link between quality assurance processes and programme quality, the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education did not quite achieve this with its two rounds of institutional reviews²¹.

From 2001 there was a greater focus on programme quality

A new evaluation system was developed as a result of the *Studentinflytande och kvalitetsutveckling i högskolan* bill²². The evaluation of programmes for general degrees, professional qualifications and third-cycle programmes began in 2001. The cycle was six years' long and during this period thematic studies were also carried out whereby specific quality aspects were reviewed, such as gender equality, diversity and internationalisation.

The system based on institutional reviews did not provide enough information to students to help them to choose between programmes and higher education institutions. Employers and grant-givers also needed more information about programmes. Instead of the focus being on the institutional and faculty management, it would now be on programme quality. The possibility of sanctions was also introduced for programmes that didn't meet quality standards²³. "Monitoring, development and information" became something of a mantra for the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education's subject and programme evaluations during the period²⁴.

¹⁸ The university colleges of Karlstad, Örebro and Växjö became universities on 1 January 1999 and Mithögskolan on 1 January 2005. See e.g. Johan Gribbe's *Förändring och kontinuitet*, the Swedish Higher Education Authority 2022, page 136.

¹⁹ Wahlén Staffan, *Från granskning och bedömning av kvalitetsarbete till utvärdering av utbildningsresultat*. The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, report series 2012:21 R, page 10.

²⁰ Wahlén Staffan, *Från granskning och bedömning av kvalitetsarbete till utvärdering av utbildningsresultat*. The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, report series 2012:21 R, page 8.

²¹ *Ibid*, page 10.

²² Bill 1999/2000:28, *Studentinflytande och kvalitetsutveckling i högskolan*.

²³ *Ibid*, page 12.

²⁴ *Ibid*.

The model was similar to the model for institutional reviews. The assessment panels, which also included Nordic experts, wrote a report in which they both reported on the specific programmes' quality and provided a national picture of the subject or programme²⁵.

The system was quality enhancing. During the period, around 10% of the programmes evaluated were given the assessment *under review*. However, they showed sufficient improvement that they were able to be approved during the follow-up one year later.²⁶ According to a report from UKÄ, the system helped to increase student influence and the significance of course evaluations, and probably also to ensure the hiring of more teachers. It also helped to ensure more general reviews of programmes, changes to course literature and training in methodology.²⁷ Although the assessment of programme outcomes was to a certain extent included in the system, in practice the focus was on prerequisites and processes. One weakness was that, in principle, there was no assessment of programme outcomes.²⁸

After 2002, when state university colleges were authorised to award magister degrees, the number of applications reduced significantly until 2007 when they could apply to award master's degrees²⁹.

The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education already a full member of ENQA in 2005

While the national quality assurance system was being developed, Sweden was active internationally through the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education. The agency actively took part in the development of ENQA and was already a full member in 2005. Then University Chancellor Sigbrit Franke was also on its board for three years. The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education was also one of the driving forces for the development of common guidelines for the evaluation of higher education programmes for universities and university colleges, and quality assurance organisations.³⁰

The system that crashed in 2007–2010

After the cycle that included subject and programme evaluations, a new evaluation model was introduced that was meant to be in place until 2012.³¹ After consulting stakeholders, the Swedish National Agency for

²⁵ Ibid, page 13.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Utbildningsutvärderingarnas effekter*. Report 2015:21, page 5.

²⁸ Ibid, page 37.

²⁹ Wahlén Staffan, *Från granskning och bedömning av kvalitetsarbete till utvärdering av utbildningsresultat*. The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, report series 2012:21 R, page 11.

³⁰ Ibid, page 21.

³¹ The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, *Nationellt kvalitetssäkringssystem för perioden 2007–2012*. Report 2006:57 R.

Higher Education developed the model, which was designed to capitalise on previous experiences and combine the advantages of the different forms of evaluation³². Five different components were included:

- reviews of HEIs' quality processes
- subject and programme evaluations
- appraisals of degree-awarding powers
- thematic studies
- awards for Centres of Excellence in Higher Education.

The system was discontinued early following criticisms from HEIs regarding methodological issues and the fact that there was too little emphasis on quality in programme outcomes³³.

New possibilities for university colleges introduced in 2007³⁴ as part of the Bologna Process

The higher education reforms of 2007 were a part of the Bologna Process for increased mobility, employability and competitiveness for Europe. They entailed a new structure for higher education, with a first-cycle level (three years), second-cycle level (two years) and third-cycle level (usually three years, but four years in Sweden). New qualification descriptors were also defined for all qualifications. At the same time, a new credit system was introduced, in line with the common European credit system (*European Credit Transfer System*, or ECTS).

A two-year master's degree was added to the second-cycle level, with a clear research connection, and therefore high quality requirements. Universities and university colleges with disciplinary research domains were allowed to start offering master's degrees, but other university colleges needed to apply for degree-awarding powers in the profile-based fields of study for which they had the right prerequisites. Arts programmes were given a structure that reflected the structure for general degrees.

Government bill 2008/09:134 *Forskarutbildning med profilering och kvalitet* proposed that all university colleges be given the opportunity to apply for degree-awarding powers at third-cycle level. The powers would apply to a narrower domain than a disciplinary research domain. The proposal came into force in 2010.

³² The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, *Hur har det gått?* Report 2007:31R.

³³ The government, *Kvalitetssäkring av högre utbildning*, *Official communication 2015/16:76*.

³⁴ See the chapter "Bolognaprocessen och utbildningens internationalisering" in Johan Gribbe's *Förändring och kontinuitet, Reformen inom högre utbildning och forskning, 1940–2020*. The Swedish Higher Education Authority 2022.

Increased autonomy leads to a focus on results and monitoring

As a result of the *Fokus på kunskap – kvalitet i den högre utbildningen* bill³⁵ a new system was introduced.³⁶ This would consist of programme evaluations and appraisals of degree-awarding powers. The bill also provided for the shortening of the cycle to four years. The evaluation of third-cycle programmes was postponed until the next cycle for resource-related reasons.

The basis for the reviews was students' independent projects, self-evaluations and assessors' site visits to HEIs. Surveys of previous students would also be included, but they were removed as a basis for reviews after the first evaluations. The overall assessment would be indicated on a three-point scale and the programmes with the highest assessment, i.e. very high quality, generated extra resources for the HEIs. As with previous programme evaluations, receiving the lowest score meant that degree-awarding powers were put under review and the HEI was given a year to remedy the shortcomings, by presenting an action plan. 2,088 programmes were evaluated. 26% of these were found to be of insufficient quality. The HEIs chose to discontinue 71 of these programmes themselves. Ten programmes had their degree-awarding powers revoked.³⁷

The fact that the focus was no longer on prerequisites and processes was connected with HEIs having increased autonomy, and being able to decide, to a greater degree, how to organise their activities, as a result of the autonomy-related reforms. The aim of the new model was to avoid undesirable management effects. It also meant that the emphasis was on quality control and, to a lesser degree, on development. The reviews would also meet different stakeholders' needs for information about programme quality, including the needs of students.

Assessments of the system were mixed. On the positive side, it was said that it contributed to a greater focus on qualificative targets, which contributed to the development of the programmes. The criticisms were that independent projects occupied too great a place and a broader assessment basis was needed. The model was also said to be less suited to the assessment of programmes that led to professional qualifications or arts degrees. Another criticism was that the assessors' expertise wasn't drawn on to contribute to quality development³⁸.

In 2012, the then Swedish National Agency for Higher Education was assessed again by ENQA in a review conducted by an external

³⁵ Bill 2009/10:139.

³⁶ *Högskoleverkets system för kvalitetsutvärdering 2011–2014*. Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, report series 2012:15 R (approved December 2010, revised June 2012).

³⁷ The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Erfarenheter och lärdomar av kvalitetsutvärderingar 2011–2014 inklusive uppföljningar till 2017*. Report 2017:10, page 11.

³⁸ See, for example, *Kvalitetssäkring av högre utbildning*. U2015/1626/UH.

assessment panel. The review showed that the organisation did not comply with the ESG, which led to it losing its membership of ENQA. Criticisms from the sector soon followed. SUHF wrote in a press release:

During the work on the new Swedish evaluation system, SUHF made similar criticisms, on many occasions, to those now being made by ENQA, but wasn't listened to. The criticisms concern the evaluation system's focus and design, including serious shortcomings in the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education's autonomy with regard to the government and parliament. We now urge the government to promptly task the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education with changing the current evaluation system so that it complies with the European standards (ESG). SUHF wants a development focus, and an independent and internationally accepted quality assurance system for higher education.³⁹

Stockholm University's then Vice-Chancellor, Kåre Bremer, wrote in her blog:

ENQA notes that HSV's current system, which, as everyone knows, is practically entirely based on degree project quality, does not meet the guidelines. This is particularly embarrassing as HSV, as ENQA writes, was one of the organisation's founders and was a strong driving force for the development of ENQA's guidelines [...] I, and many of my vice-chancellor colleagues, have repeatedly criticised the relevance and reliability of HSV's system (see e.g. the blog post-dated 24/8). I hope that ENQA's decision results in the development of a new system, which is what we need.⁴⁰

On UKÄ's website, University Chancellor Lars Haikola wrote:

It is important for UKÄ and Sweden to be a part of ENQA – we should be members of this organisation with the next generation of evaluation systems. We should be part of the European higher education family.⁴¹

The next chapter summarises the government's starting points for the assignment that UKÄ would be given of designing a new system.

³⁹ https://www.umu.se/nyheter/suhf-sveriges-utvarderingssystem-av-hogre-utbildning-underkanns_5831039/ (retrieved on 30/01/2023).

⁴⁰ <https://karebremer.wordpress.com/2012/09/18/hsv-och-enqa/> (retrieved on 30/01/2023).

⁴¹ <https://www.uka.se/om-oss/aktuellt/nyheter/2014-03-27-vardefullt-att-hogskolan-debatteras.html> (retrieved on 30/01/2023).

A new national system takes shape

Four components

In the official communication *Kvalitetssäkring av högre utbildning*⁴² of 2015, the government presented the bases for a new quality assurance system that, to a larger degree than previously, would take in account HEIs' own quality assurance processes. The purpose of UKÄ's reviews would be both to monitor results and contribute to the quality development of programmes. The official communication stated that the bases were a framework and that UKÄ would be tasked with developing and introducing the system in line with the framework, the applicable laws and ordinances, and the principles for quality assurance produced as part of the Bologna Process. The further development of the system would take place in consultation with stakeholders, i.e. HEIs and student and employer and labour market representatives.

Under the previous system, UKÄ's programme evaluations generated extra resources for HEIs on the basis of first-cycle and second-cycle programmes judged to be of very high quality. This would no longer be the case under the new system that would come into force on 1 January 2016.

The system would consist of four components:

- appraisals of degree-awarding powers⁴³
- reviews of HEIs' quality assurance processes (institutional reviews)
- programme evaluations
- thematic evaluations

The government's official communication was based on the assignment that investigator Professor Harriet Wallberg was given by Minister Jan Björklund, of producing a proposal for a new quality assurance system.⁴⁴ In the assignment it was specifically stipulated that usefulness and preparation for working life should be an important aspect, and that the role of students in reviews should be clearer. As previously, degree-awarding powers could be withdrawn if a HEI did not meet the stated

⁴² Government, Official communication. 2015/16:76.

⁴³ UKÄ decides on degree-awarding powers for universities and university colleges that are under state governance. For independent higher education providers (i.e. foundations or companies) degree-awarding powers are decided on by the government. The government usually sends applications to UKÄ for appraisal before decisions are made.

⁴⁴ Education Department consultation memorandum *Kvalitetssäkring av högre utbildning* (U2015/1626/UH).

requirements. The system would also need to be based on HEIs being autonomous, and take profiling into account. It would also need to be transparent and clear.

Aspect areas and perspectives become assessment areas

In the report *Nationellt system för kvalitetssäkring av högre utbildning – redovisning av ett regeringsuppdrag* of 2016, UKÄ reported on the government assignment to further develop and introduce the new system. It is apparent from the foreword that an important point of reference, in addition to the applicable laws and ordinances, is the European standards and guidelines for quality assurance defined for higher education. The foreword states that “UKÄ’s reviews should not just be legitimate internationally, but also ultimately contribute to an increased internationalisation of Swedish higher education”.

It is highlighted that the development work presented in the report is not complete, and that the system should be tested through pilot studies of both programme evaluations and institutional reviews. An important part of the development work also consisted of dialogue with stakeholders in around the university college sector.

Based on the purpose set out in the government’s official communication, and the four components, UKÄ presented the four aspect areas (which later became assessment areas) and three perspectives (which later became assessment criteria or assessment areas). Together these constituted a type of common framework for the reviews with regard to the different components. This is because these areas and perspectives together cover the applicable Swedish laws and ordinances and the ESG. Although this was a common framework, the focus and importance of the different areas with regard to the different components differed. The first aspect area, Governance and organisation, was also not included in programme evaluations and appraisals of degree-awarding powers.

The aspect areas were

- Governance and organisation
- Environment, resources and area
- Design, teaching/learning and outcomes
- Follow-up, actions and feedback.

The three perspectives were

- Students’ and doctoral students’ perspective
- Working life perspective
- Gender equality perspective.

The purpose of changing the name from aspect areas to assessment areas was to clarify the information sought and that would be assessed in each area.⁴⁵

As in UKÄ's and the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education's previous reviews, the reviews would then be based on peer reviews by independent external assessment panels consisting of experts, student or doctoral student representatives and employer and labour market representatives.

In the report, UKÄ stated the position that a two-point scale should be used both for programme evaluations and for institutional reviews. The finding was that the "continued assessment of HEIs with quality assurance processes that do not meet the assessment criteria, when combined with evaluation of an extra selection of study programmes, is sufficient for ensuring the quality of courses and programmes. No additional sanctions are judged necessary".

The government assignment also included submitting proposals for how the quality of study programmes can be compared. UKÄ found that "the assignment to coordinate comparisons of programmes should be separate from the assignment to continue developing and implementing a new quality assurance system".

In the report on the government assignment it was also stated that UKÄ planned to apply for renewed membership of ENQA. With the new system UKÄ was considered to meet the European standards for the quality assurance of higher education. To meet the standards, a system was required that included both monitoring and the enhancement of quality, as well as a quality assurance agency that was autonomous and acted independently. The purpose was to ensure that review processes and decisions were factually based.

A pilot study of the evaluation of third-cycle programmes was initiated in 2015. Other pilot studies were launched in autumn 2016 and the six-year cycle of periodic reviews began in 2017. The experiences of assessors, the HEIs evaluated and UKÄ were used in the development of UKÄ's programme reviews.

⁴⁵ Taken from the internal powerpoint presentation *LSG förändringar* on 15/01/2018.

Outcomes and experiences from the 2017–2022 quality assurance system

UKÄ's reviews have both a monitoring and a development aim. They are based on peer reviews carried out by assessment panels, which are appointed by UKÄ after being nominated by HEIs, student unions and employer and labour market organisations. The assessment panels also include student and doctoral student representatives, employer and labour representatives and academic experts. Prior to the reviews, the HEI to be reviewed writes a self-evaluation⁴⁶, which together with other data⁴⁷ and site visits and interviews constitutes the basis for the assessors' assessment, presented by them in a report. UKÄ's role in this part of the review process is to assist the assessment panel with the calibration of the report, by ensuring, among other things, that the assessments are well substantiated and the assessors refer to relevant data. A new element in this system is that, in institutional reviews, UKÄ invites the local student unions of the HEIs to submit a student and doctoral student report. After a sharing procedure, which gives HEIs the opportunity to point out any factual errors, UKÄ makes decisions using the assessors' reviews as a starting point.⁴⁸

The reviews are conducted in line with the predefined assessment areas, and there are one or more assessment criteria for each of them. The assessment areas Governance and organisation, Prerequisites and Design, teaching/learning and outcomes are based on both the applicable Swedish laws and ordinances and the ESG. Agreed national and international frameworks⁴⁹ and guidelines for research also play an important role as starting points for the reviewing of HEIs' quality assurance processes for research, in addition to the Higher Education Act and Higher Education Ordinance⁵⁰.

⁴⁶ For appraisals of degree-awarding powers, the applicant HEI submits an application. This resembles a self-evaluation in many ways.

⁴⁷ Information about the assessment basis for the different components can be found in the guidelines for each component.

⁴⁸ A new feature for this cycle was also that an effort was made to synchronise HEI inspections with institutional reviews, the HEI inspections preceding the institutional reviews. This offered the possibility of using reports from inspections as one of the sources of data for institutional reviews, which could also be used to follow-up on the recommendations that HEIs were given during the inspections.

⁴⁹ The national framework with global principles for the quality assurance of research produced by SUHF.

⁵⁰ See the introduction to this report or UKÄ's *Vägledning för granskning av lärosätenas kvalitetssäkringsarbete – avseende forskning*. Report 202021:15, revised in May 2021.

Student influence and participation are governed by the Higher Education Act, particularly in relation to the HEI's quality assurance processes (Chapter 1, section 4). Furthermore, the student perspective is more clearly described in the most-recently revised ESG (2015) than in the previous version. Working life and collaboration are also governed by the Higher Education Act. For example, one of the aims of first-cycle programmes must be to prepare students to deal with changes in working life (Chapter 1, section 8). Gender equality is also governed by the Higher Education Act (Chapter 1, section 5). The government announced in the official communication *Kvalitetssäkring av högre utbildning*⁵¹ that universities and university colleges would be tasked with further reinforcing work on gender mainstreaming.⁵² When developing the national quality assurance system, UKÄ therefore took note that gender equality and gender mainstreaming are quality factors, which should be taken into account in reviews.⁵³

This chapter presents the outcomes and experiences from UKÄ's periodic reviews during the 2017–2022 cycle. The sections on institutional reviews and programme evaluations each begin with a section on the pilot reviews that preceded the periodic reviews. As already mentioned, the pilot evaluations of third-cycle programmes had already begun before the government's official communication and UKÄ's subsequent report on the government assignment to develop a new quality assurance system.

Institutional reviews

This section presents the reviews of HEIs' quality assurance processes that UKÄ carried out during the cycle. The reviews were grouped together in rounds that included HEIs with similar characteristics. This had a number of practical benefits and in the feedback conferences that followed the reviews the participants were able, for example, to address challenges that the HEIs in the same round all faced. Until round 7, quality assurance processes for programmes were reviewed. However, given that in 2017 UKÄ was given the government assignment of also reviewing HEIs' quality assurance processes for research, round 8 also included reviews of the quality assurance of research. For this reason, this round involved double reviews, whereby each assessment panel was tasked with conducting two reviews, a programme review and a research review. The assessment panels therefore had to be expanded from five to eight assessors⁵⁴.

⁵¹ The Education Department, *Kvalitetssäkring av högre utbildning*. Official communication 2015/16:76

⁵² The government programme Gender Mainstreaming in Government Agencies (JiM).

⁵³ The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Nationellt system för kvalitetssäkring av högre utbildning – redovisning av ett regeringsuppdrag*. Report 2016:15.

⁵⁴ In round 4, one assessment panel was tasked with reviewing two HEIs simultaneously, but without comparing them. The assessment panel was expanded in this case too, by adding more experts.

Before the periodic reviews were introduced, they were preceded by pilot reviews. A pilot review of the quality assurance of programmes was conducted and, later in the cycle, a pilot review of the quality assurance of research.

In autumn 2020, UKÄ decided that five HEIs that only had one degree-awarding authorisation and one educational environment, with less than 100 full-time students in total, should not undergo a review of quality assurance processes, but instead be subject to a programme evaluation of the programmes offered by the HEI.⁵⁵

Institutional reviews – programmes

The pilot reviews

At the end of 2016, the cycle was initiated with a pilot review of four HEIs' quality assurance processes to test the review method. The overall assessment was given on a three-point scale. For the pilot reviews, none of the HEIs involved would be given the assessment *under review*. If any of the HEIs didn't receive an *approved* assessment, they would instead be included in the periodic reviews. Only one of the HEIs received an approved assessment.⁵⁶

Eight rounds of periodic reviews

After the pilot review, the guidelines were revised. The scale for the overall assessment was changed from a two-point scale to a three-point scale, i.e. *approved quality assurance processes*, or *quality assurance processes approved with reservations* or *under review*. To be given an overall assessment of *approved quality assurance processes* all the assessment areas needed to be satisfactory. In addition to this change, adjustments were also made to the method with respect to what are referred to in the pilot as aspect areas and perspectives. The four aspect areas and three perspectives then became the six assessment areas below:

- Governance and organisation
- Prerequisites
- Design, teaching/learning and outcomes
- Gender equality
- Student and doctoral student perspectives
- Working life and collaboration.

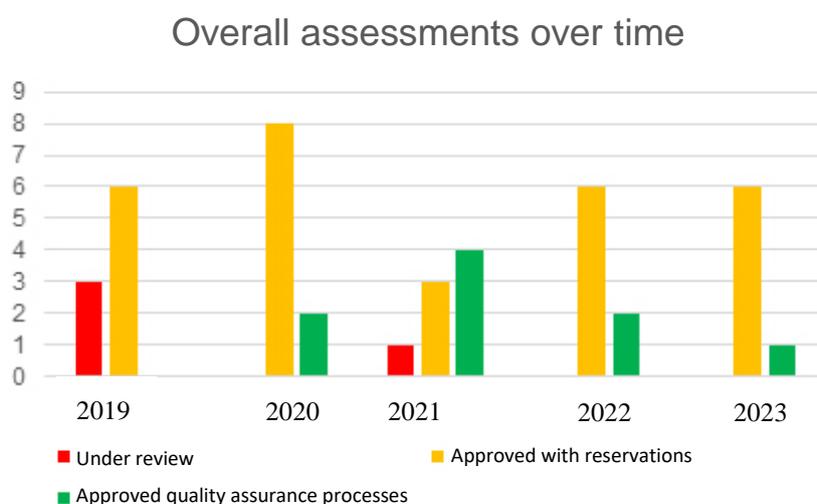
⁵⁵ The HEIs in question were Ericastiftelsen (psychotherapist qualification), Evidens AB (psychotherapist qualification), Gammelkroppa skogsskola (forestry technician qualification), Svenska institutet för kognitiv psykoterapi (psychotherapist qualification) and Skandinavians akademi för psykoterapiutveckling (psychotherapist qualification).

⁵⁶ In the pilot, Dalarna University College was given an approved assessment of its quality assurance processes and therefore didn't need to be included in the periodic round of reviews.

Key takeaways from the outcomes

As of April 2023, a total of 42 reviews in eight rounds of periodic reviews have been decided on. This means that 43 of the country's approximately 50 HEIs will have undergone an institutional review of their quality assurance processes for programmes. Out of these 42 *periodic reviews*, four HEIs received the overall assessment *under review*, 29 were approved with reservations and 9 HEIs were found to have approved quality assurance processes.⁵⁷

Figure 2. Outcomes over time of the overall assessment for 42 periodic institutional reviews decided on in 2019–2023.



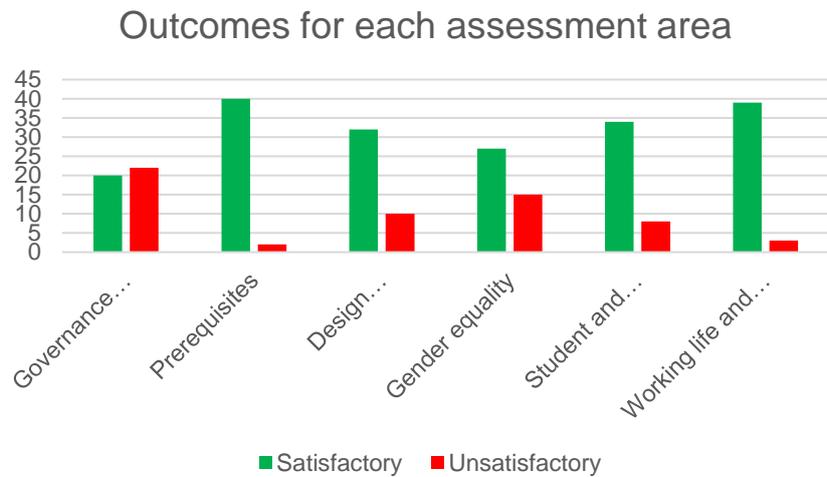
We can see that not many HEIs received the assessment *under review*, and that this number decreased during the cycle, compared with the pilot and the first round. This may indicate that quality assurance processes have improved over time, among other things as a result of UKÄ's reviews. The round involving large universities clearly peaked in 2021 with regard to overall assessments of fully approved. The trend of a steady increase in fully approved reviews then slowed. On the other hand, we can see that no HEIs have received the overall assessment *under review* during the last two years.

Prerequisites were satisfactory the most often, as was Working life and collaboration

The outcomes of the institutional reviews show that the assessment areas Prerequisites and Working life and collaboration were found to be satisfactory the most often. Governance and organisation is the assessment area that was most commonly judged to be unsatisfactory.

⁵⁷ The reports were based on UKÄ's feedback reports to the government for the years 2019–2021, the authority's analyses during the course of the cycle and the reflection reports on the review rounds.

Figure 3. Outcomes for each assessment area in the 42 periodic reviews decided on

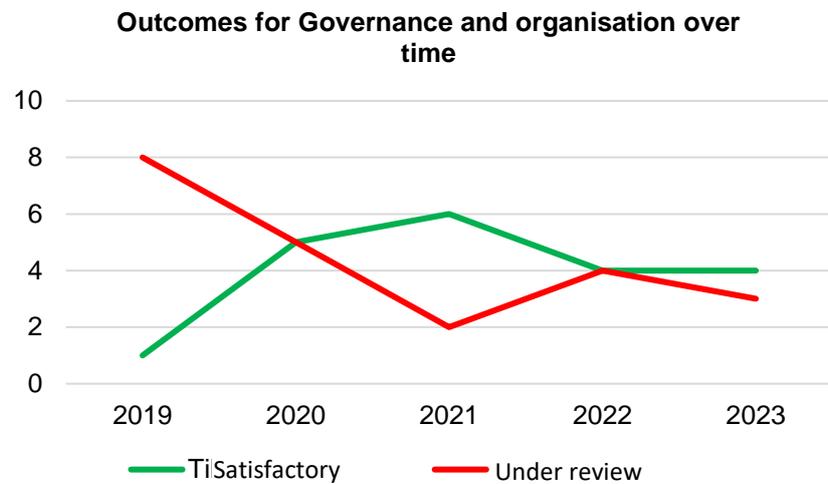


HEIs' quality systems often under development

At the start of the cycle, it was apparent that in many cases the HEIs were working on developing their quality systems. This means that not all of the systems' parts had been tested in practice at the time of the review, and the self-initiated programme evaluations had not yet begun. It was also not always clear how previous forms of systematic quality processes and reviews at HEIs had contributed to the development of the new quality systems. Some parts were lacking or had not yet been fully introduced. For example, the assessment panels stated that there were often central policy documents and procedures in place, but that the HEIs needed to develop the documentation to be able to improve systematisation. The assessment panels believe as a rule that a HEI's quality system must have been tested in real world conditions for it to be possible to assess how effective and systematic it is.

The majority of the quality systems were built around cycles with different time intervals, most commonly of one, three or six years. Not all of the HEIs who chose this arrangement had all the cycles in their quality systems.

Figure 4. Outcomes over time for assessment area 1 Governance and organisation in the 42 periodic reviews decided on



According to the results of all of the reviews decided on, the development of HEIs’ quality systems is an area in need of improvement that tends to reduce over time. There are many procedures and processes in place, but HEIs need to address the results that quality systems generate and, where necessary, produce action plans and follow-up on the actions taken.⁵⁸

There is room for development in the systematic improvement of programmes

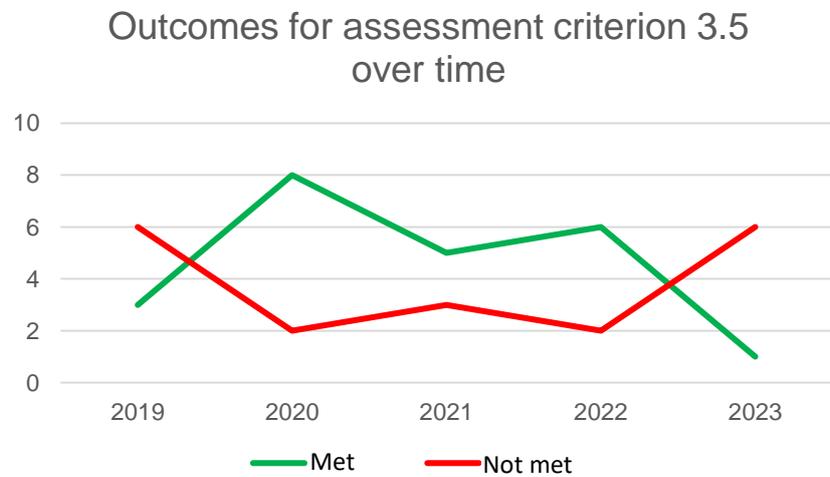
Well-functioning quality assurance processes include systematic work whereby HEIs use the information produced from follow-ups and evaluations within the quality system to identify development needs and improve both the quality system itself and programmes.

In the assessment area Design, teaching/learning and outcomes only 10 of the 42 HEIs were given unsatisfactory assessments during the cycle. In this assessment area there is one assessment criterion that many HEIs (17) didn’t fulfil, however, and this is the criterion concerning the development of programmes by drawing on continuous follow-ups and periodic reviews.⁵⁹ This assessment criterion is clearly linked to the quality system and the degree to which it is focused and systematic enough to ensure the quality of programmes, and whether it has been tested enough to conclude that it is able to ensure the programmes’ quality.

⁵⁸ Particularly linked to assessment criterion 1.5 *The HEI ensures that the results and conclusions generated by the quality system are systematically taken into account in strategic governance, quality processes and the development of the quality system*, which almost half of the HEIs were considered not to have met.

⁵⁹ Assessment criterion 3.5 *Based on continuous follow-ups and periodic reviews, the HEI takes the measures required to improve and develop programmes*. Out of the nine HEIs that were given an overall assessment of approved quality assurance processes, five did not meet the assessment criterion.

Figure 5. Outcomes over time for assessment criterion 3.5 *Based on continuous follow-ups and periodic reviews, the HEI takes the measures required to improve and develop programmes in the 42 periodic reviews decided on*



During the first half of the cycle, it was apparent that at many HEIs only certain programmes were reviewed or had reviews planned for them. Several of the assessment panels therefore recommended that the HEIs make their evaluations more systematic by introducing peer reviews of the whole range of programmes. The assessment panels found in some cases that they didn't have enough evidence to conclude that follow-ups and evaluations were effective and quality enhancing.⁶⁰

Course evaluations are a quality assurance process that appears under several assessment criteria in the assessment panels' reports. They are a central part of the continuous programme follow-up and development process and a key tool for student participation in quality assurance. In addition, there are several examples of course evaluations being of use in other quality assurance and quality enhancement processes. For example, they may be used as a basis for HEIs' own programme evaluations or for competency planning processes.

The parts of the process that fall short are not exactly the same for all of the HEIs, but the parts repeatedly mentioned by the assessment panels include the observance and implementation of procedures, shortcomings in feedback to students, and also, to a certain degree, in how the results of course evaluations are reported to the management, and the extent to which results are systematically taken into account and lead to the improvement of programmes.

Another issue linked to the course evaluation process and self-initiated programme evaluations is how HEIs ensure and follow-up on the actual implementation of the measures decided on, whether there is a

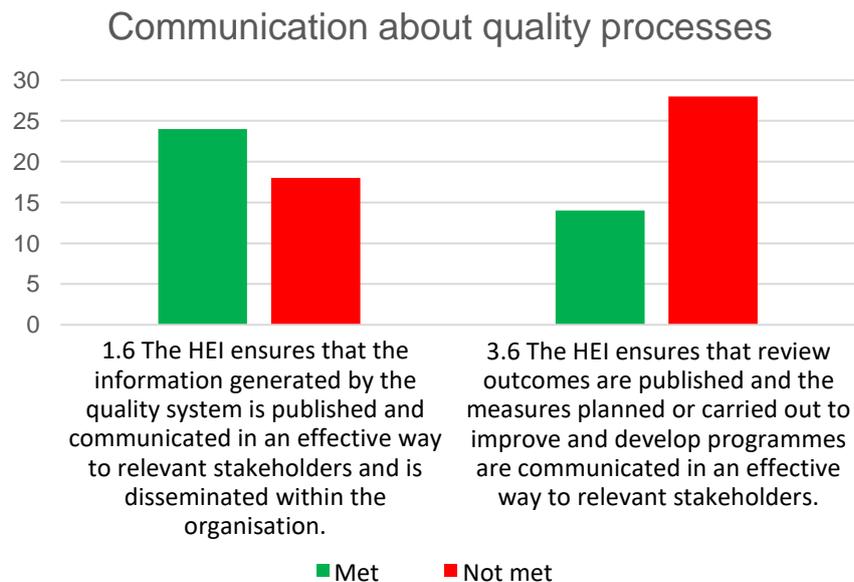
⁶⁰ The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Lärosätessgranskningar i omgångarna 2 och 3 – Reflektionsrapport*, Ref. No 411-00459-20.

monitoring function for this and, if so, whether it is effective. A couple of assessment panels also advise establishing benchmarks for how institutions, faculties and central management should assess the results of evaluations and reviews.

Communication about the outcomes of quality assurance processes needs to be improved

Another major area in need of improvement is the communication of both information about quality systems and the outcomes of quality assurance processes. How information about and the outcomes of quality assurance processes are communicated has a significant impact on the incorporation of and commitment to systematic work to improve programmes. It is therefore important that HEIs have systematic processes and procedures for ensuring that outcomes and measures that are planned or carried out are effectively communicated to relevant internal and external stakeholders.

Figure 6. Outcomes of the two assessment criteria concerning communication about quality assurance processes in the 42 periodic reviews decided on



The assessment criterion that was the most often found to have not been met, even for HEIs that were given an overall assessment of approved quality assurance processes, is 3.6 *The HEI ensures that review outcomes are published and the measures planned or carried out to improve and develop programmes are communicated in an effective way to relevant stakeholders*. An area clearly in need of improvement in this regard is the course evaluation process, and the communication of outcomes to stakeholders, and particularly students.

Gender equality is not systematically taken into account in programmes

The assessment area Gender equality only has one assessment criterion, which concerns whether gender equality will be taken into account in programme design, teaching/learning and outcomes. Often, HEIs' duty to mainstream gender equality had led to a lot of activities in this area, but it wasn't always systematically taken into account in programmes. The reviews showed that a systematic approach to how HEIs work to integrate gender equality in programmes needs to be developed. HEIs also need to improve how they follow-up on gender equality in programmes, and sometimes improve the understanding of what gender equality means for their activities.⁶¹

A significant area in need of improvement despite positive outcomes

The assessment area Student and doctoral student perspective is another assessment area that only has one assessment criterion. Formal rights for students to take part in quality assurance processes are often in place, but several HEIs and programmes face challenges when it comes to actual student representation and student engagement. The challenges usually take the form of difficulties recruiting student representatives for decision-making and deliberating bodies. It is also common for HEIs to need to work on increasing response rates for course and programme evaluations so that they are able to be used as a reliable basis for quality development. It is not always clear to the assessors how evaluations are used to improve programmes. A further recurring and common challenge is a shortage of information about measures taken to improve programmes and how information was taken into account in quality systems.⁶²

The reviews pointed to a couple of important areas in need of improvement for third-cycle programmes. These concern ensuring that doctoral students' individual study plans are systematically followed up throughout the HEI, and arrangements are made for international doctoral students who aren't fluent in Swedish to take part in the student influence activities organised.⁶³

Institutional reviews – research

In 2017, UKÄ's assignment was expanded to also include the quality assurance of research. The method development took as its starting point the national system for the quality assurance of higher education. The method development framework was composed of the *European Charter and Code for Researchers* and SUHF's framework for the quality assurance and quality enhancement of research. The process of

⁶¹ The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Kartläggning av hur bedömning av perspektivet jämställdhet kommer till uttryck i UKÄ:s lärosätessgranskningar avseende utbildning*. Memo, Ref. No 411-00459-20.

⁶² The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Studentperspektivet. En kartläggning av hur studentfrågor kommer till uttryck i UKÄ:s granskningar*. Report 2021:3.

⁶³ The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Granskning av kvalitetssäkringsarbetet vid sex universitet 2021*. Internal memo, 21/02/2023.

integrating research in the national system for the quality assurance of higher education was completed in three stages.

During the first stage, a report was produced setting out the principles for the reviewing of the quality assurance of research. The report was submitted to the Government Offices and sent for consultation to the relevant stakeholders.

During the second stage, the responses to the consultation were compiled and the analysis and method development process was started at UKÄ. The aim was to deepen the understanding of the quality assurance of research and the prerequisites for the integration of reviews of the quality assurance of research in the national quality assurance system. UKÄ judged that the same assessment areas could also be applied, to a large degree, to the quality assurance of research, but the assessment area Working life and collaboration ultimately only covered collaboration and the assessment area Student and doctoral student perspective was completely omitted as an assessment area.

During the third stage of the method development process, the assessment criteria described in the guidelines were pilot tested.⁶⁴

The pilot reviews

In 2020, UKÄ reviewed three HEIs in the pilot for institutional reviews of research. Two of the three HEIs were given the overall assessment *quality assurance processes approved with reservations*. One of the HEIs was given the assessment *under review*.⁶⁵

One of the reviews was a so-called double review. This means that the same assessment panel reviewed the quality assurance of both programmes and research. The assessment panel was expanded from five assessors, which was standard for institutional reviews, to eight assessors. The experiences from the double review were taken into account in the eighth round of institutional reviews, which consisted of reviews of the quality assurance of both programmes and research, except in one case.

A round of periodic reviews

Prior to the periodic reviews, adjustments were made to the method and guidelines in consultation with the sector, above all the HEIs and assessors that took part in the pilot, and with UKÄ's reference groups.

⁶⁴ The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Kvalitetssäkring av forskning – Rapportering av ett regeringsuppdrag*. Report 2018:2.

⁶⁵ The overall assessment of the HEIs' quality assurance processes for research was given on the same three-point scale as for institutional reviews of programmes. Although it was a pilot, the HEIs reviewed were followed up just as with periodic reviews.

Although many aspects of the method that had been developed worked well, there was still room for improvement.⁶⁶

The changes consisted of the five assessment areas becoming two. The purpose was to refine the reviews, avoid overlaps and make reviews more targeted, while reducing the workload for HEIs and assessors. The two assessment areas became

- Governance, organisation and teaching/learning
- Prerequisites.

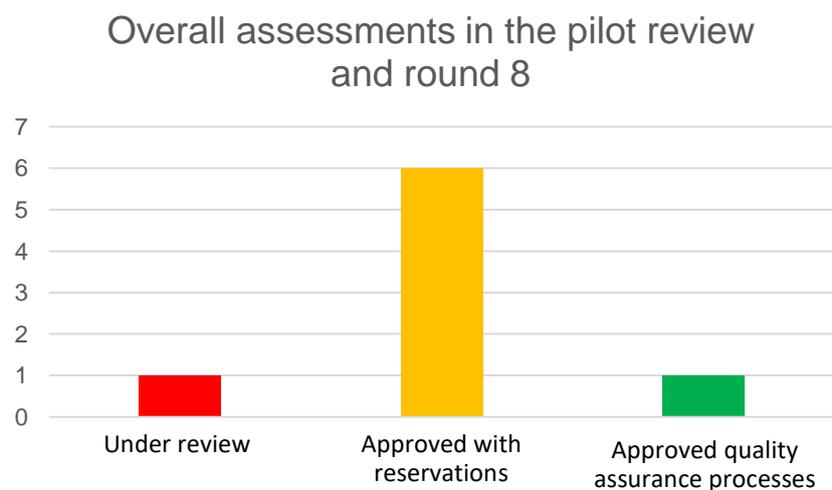
Collaboration and Gender equality were integrated as assessment criteria in the Prerequisites assessment area. Design, teaching/learning and outcomes became a part of the Governance, organisation and teaching/learning assessment area.

As already mentioned, the reviews in the round were double reviews, except in one case where the HEI's research component was included in the pilot and it therefore only needed to have its quality assurance processes for programmes reviewed.

Key takeaways from the outcomes of institutional reviews of research

In 2023, UKÄ decided on a further five reviews that were conducted in line with the revised guidelines. Four of the HEIs were assessed as *quality assurance processes approved with reservations* and one as *quality assurance processes approved*. As the data are limited and the revisions after the pilot for institutional reviews of research were not that extensive, the outcomes are presented for the eight reviews together.

Figure 7. Outcomes of the overall assessment in eight reviews of HEIs' quality assurance processes for research (pilot and round 8).



⁶⁶ When revising the assessment areas and assessment criteria, UKÄ took into account, for example: *Förslag till förändring av bedömningsområden vid granskning av lärosätenas kvalitetssäkringsarbete inom utbildning*, SUHF's expert group on quality issues, 16/12/2021.

As the revision of the guidelines after the pilot resulted in the five assessment areas being reduced to two (Governance, organisation and teaching/learning and Prerequisites) and assessment criteria were moved and merged, it is not possible to present the outcomes for each assessment area.

Quality systems under development

Quality assurance is in many ways built into the research process through continuous peer reviews, such as through applications for research funding and on the publication of research results. Although the development of quality assurance processes for research is new to HEIs, the reviews show that the majority of the HEIs have a mostly well-functioning quality system for research. Most of them ensure that they continuously follow-up, analyse and use information that has a bearing on research quality and relevance. With some exceptions, HEIs also systematically work to promote good research practice and prevent and manage research-related misconduct. The areas in need of improvement that the assessment teams identified differ between reviews. One HEI lacked an overall system for the quality assurance of research in the pilot. At another HEI, the system was untested, and at the third HEI the system only covered parts of the research conducted. Not having an overall system for the quality assurance and quality enhancement of research may result in a lack of clarity regarding roles and responsibilities in quality assurance processes, which makes it more difficult for HEIs to assume responsibility for the quality of their activities.⁶⁷ The periodic review (cycle round 8) showed that, at a couple of HEIs, the recurring peer reviews need to be developed, so that the quality system as a whole is focused enough and able to contribute to the quality enhancement of research. A couple of HEIs need to develop their competency planning and career processes, to create better research conditions.

Approval of research infrastructure

Currently, a central issue in discussions about research quality is access to research infrastructure. The pilot review showed that, even if HEIs are investing in infrastructure, they might improve their infrastructure follow-up and strategic long-term planning. None of the HEIs were found to have met the assessment criterion in the pilot, but in the subsequent periodic review all five of the HEIs fulfilled the assessment criterion.

⁶⁷ The pilot's assessment criterion 1.2 is incorporated in assessment criterion 1.1 concerning the supporting of strategic work, engaging the management and the staff and using resources effectively.

HEIs rated highly for gender equality and collaboration

The results were good for the assessment criteria regarding gender equality and collaboration. It appeared that the HEIs were actively working on gender equality in an integrated way. This could be a consequence of the gender mainstreaming assignment given to HEIs in their 2016 public service agreement.⁶⁸ The review offered many good examples of advanced and varied forms of collaboration with the local community, but at the same time showed a need to systematise follow-ups of collaboration activities.

Follow-up of HEIs whose quality assurance processes were not fully approved

The overall assessment of HEIs' quality assurance processes is given on a three-point scale. A HEI that is given the assessment approved with reservations has two years to submit a report on the measures that it has taken to UKÄ. If the quality assurance processes are under review, the HEI must decide, in consultation with UKÄ, on an appropriate timescale for submitting the report on the measures taken. The basis for the follow-up is the HEI's report. In this report, the HEI reports on the measures taken for the assessment criterion or criteria not considered to have been met in the assessment areas not found to be satisfactory. UKÄ sets up an assessment panel that follows up on the HEI's measures. The assessment panel may choose to request additional data, or suggest the holding of an interview. Based on the assessment panel's report, UKÄ decides whether the HEI's quality assurance processes are approved, approved with reservations or are still under review after the measures taken.⁶⁹

The HEIs whose quality assurance processes are approved are followed up through dialogue meetings, surveys or conferences, for example. All the components of the quality assurance system are managed in the same way.⁷⁰

Measures taken in connection with institutional reviews of programmes

The first follow-ups were decided on in 2021, and so far a total of 16 HEIs have been followed up. The most common measures were producing or updating policy documents and procedures, making changes to management structures and meeting formats and improving communication.⁷¹ Other common measures related to improving follow-up and evaluation.

⁶⁸ 2016 public service agreement for universities and university colleges. Government decision III: 4 18/12/2015.

⁶⁹ The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Vägledning för uppföljning av granskning av lärosätenas kvalitetssäkringsarbete*. 2021, revised in 2022, Ref. No 411–00293-21.

⁷⁰ The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Vägledning för granskning av lärosätenas kvalitetssäkringsarbete – avseende forskning*. Report 2021:15.

⁷¹ Internal memo on reports on measures taken for follow-ups of institutional reviews, 10/02/2023.

Revising a policy document or publishing a new procedure is a relatively simple measure, and one that is necessary when HEIs adjust their quality systems and organisational structures. Organisational changes are also clearly linked to the assessment criteria for which HEIs were required to report the measures that they had taken. The HEIs alter management structures and divisions of responsibilities, and create new functions and job positions, to meet the recommendations of our assessment panels.

The mapping of the measures that HEIs reported during follow-ups shows that programme-related actions did not feature significantly. They appear to a greater degree, however, in connection with measures in the Gender equality assessment area. In these cases, they mainly concern the integration of the gender equality perspective in programmes.

Examples of measures taken in connection with institutional reviews of research

Two HEIs whose quality assurance processes for research were not approved were followed up. Similarly to the institutional reviews of programmes, the measures covered producing or updating policy documents and procedures, among other things in order to improve the systematisation of follow-ups and feedback in the quality system.⁷²

Programme evaluations

This section presents the programme evaluations that UKÄ carried out during the cycle. The purpose of programme evaluations is to both monitor programme outcomes and contribute to the improvement by HEIs of the quality of the programmes evaluated. The focus is on how the programmes ensure the existence of the right prerequisites for students to achieve the qualitative targets in the System of Qualifications, and on how HEIs ensure the achievement of qualitative targets by students when degrees are awarded⁷³. During the cycle, the programme evaluations were focused on vocational and third-cycle programmes.

Before the periodic evaluations were introduced, they were preceded by pilot reviews.

⁷² Internal memo on reports on measures taken for follow-ups of institutional reviews.

⁷³ The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Vägledning för utbildningsutvärdering på grundnivå och avancerad nivå*. 2016, revised in 2018, Ref. No 411-00498-16.

Evaluations of first-cycle and second-cycle programmes

Pilot evaluations of first-cycle and second-cycle programmes

To test the method, the evaluation cycle was initiated in 2016 with pilot evaluations of a selection of pre-school teacher and primary school teacher training programmes. For the pilot review, the programmes assessed as high quality did not have to undergo another review when the periodic reviews began. If a programme was not assessed as high quality in the pilot study, however, it was included in the periodic reviews.

Overall, eight programmes at eight HEIs were included in the pilot evaluation. The following programmes were evaluated:

- two pre-school teacher training programmes
- two primary school teacher training programmes with a specialisation in after-school centres
- two primary school teacher training programmes with a specialisation in pre-school and grades 1–3
- two primary school teacher training programmes with a specialisation in grades 4–6.

Out of the programmes evaluated, six were assessed as high quality and were therefore not included in the periodic evaluation round. Two of the programmes, namely one pre-school teacher training programme and one primary school teacher training programme with a specialisation in after-school centres, were given the assessment *under review*, and were therefore included in the periodic evaluation⁷⁴.

Periodic programme evaluations

After the pilot evaluation was completed, some changes were made to the guidelines. This took place in consultation with the HEIs and assessors who took part in the pilot, the advisory group and UKÄ's reference groups. Some aspects and assessment criteria were replaced with descriptive sections in the self-evaluation, revised or removed to reduce overlap. The statistical data were also removed as an assessment basis and background material was produced instead during the 2017–2022 evaluation cycle.

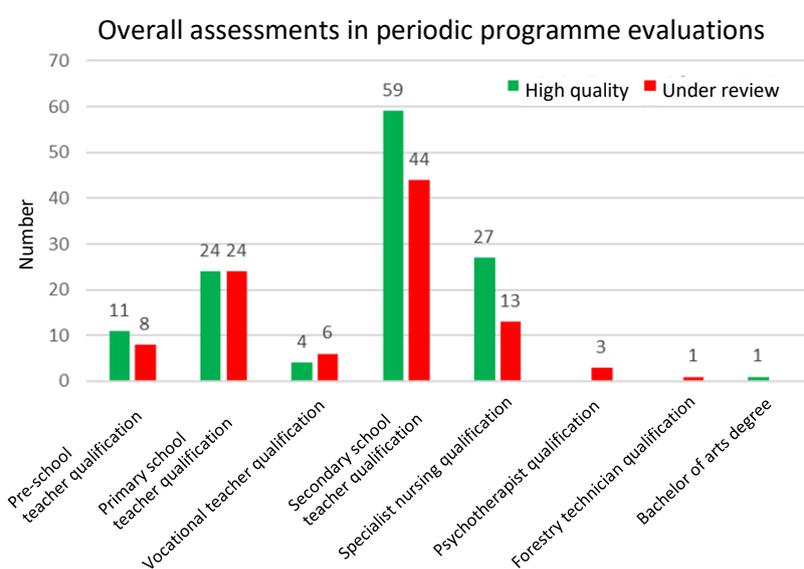
Unlike the institutional reviews, which after the pilot review changed from a two-point scale to a three-point scale, the programme evaluations retained the two-point scale for the overall assessment, i.e. high quality or under review.

⁷⁴ These programmes are included in subsequent sections/reporting on outcomes.

Key takeaways from the outcomes of the programme evaluations in 2017–2022

During the current evaluation cycle the quality of a total of 225⁷⁵ first-cycle and two-cycle programmes was evaluated. The vast majority of these were programmes leading to various teaching qualifications, followed by specialist nursing training programmes. A total of 126 (56%) of the programmes were found to be of high quality. 99 (44%) of the programmes were given the assessment *under review* and were therefore subject to a follow-up one year after the initial decision. See *Follow-up of programmes that were given the assessment under review*.

Figure 8. Outcomes for each first-cycle and second-cycle programme evaluation in periodic reviews.



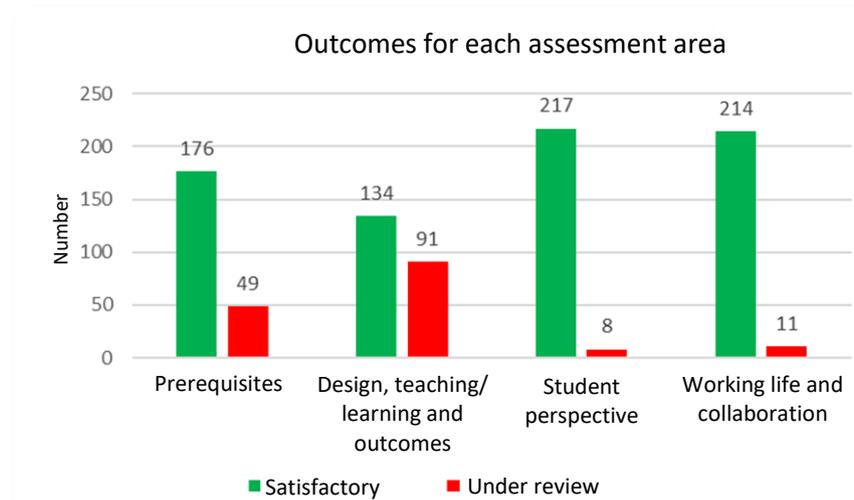
Student perspective and Working life and collaboration found to be satisfactory the most often

The assessment panels often note that there are high ambitions and conscious work at HEIs with regard to maintaining high quality in the programmes evaluated. The results of the programme evaluations show that the assessment areas Student perspective and Working life and collaboration were found to be satisfactory the most often. In a large majority of the assessments, the assessment area Prerequisites is also satisfactory. The assessment area Design, teaching/learning and outcomes is the assessment area that is found to be unsatisfactory the most often, although all the programmes except five meet the assessment criteria

⁷⁵ The psychotherapist qualification at Evidens AB is not included in the data as the higher education provider did not provide data for assessment. See the section *Follow-up of first-cycle and second-cycle programmes*.

gender equality, and follow-up, actions and feedback, in the assessment area. This is the assessment area that covers the most assessment criteria.

Figure 9. Outcomes for each assessment area in first-cycle and second-cycle programme evaluations in periodic reviews.



Prerequisites for the achievement of qualitative targets and ensuring the achievement of qualitative targets fall short the most often

Figure 9 shows that the assessment area in which the most programmes show shortcomings is Design, teaching/learning and outcomes. A deeper analysis⁷⁶ shows a link between shortcomings in ensuring the achievement of qualitative targets and an assessment of *under review*.

The analysis of the evaluations shows that many teacher training programmes, such as pre-school and primary school teacher training programmes, have difficulties ensuring students’ knowledge of current research and development work, and academic theory and qualitative and quantitative research methods. Shortcomings in the programmes’ ability to teach students to critically draw on, systematise and reflect on their own and others’ experiences and relevant research results were also noted.

The analysis of the evaluations also shows that the programmes, such as vocational and secondary school teacher training programmes, have difficulties ensuring sufficient subject knowledge and teaching and subject-specific teaching knowledge in students, and that students are able to apply this knowledge in professional practice. The evaluations of teacher training programmes, particularly linked to secondary school teacher training programmes, also showed in a number of cases that HEIs enable students to achieve qualitative targets, but that HEIs do not ensure through examinations that students have actually achieved them.

⁷⁶ The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Läraryr utbildningarna: Kvalitet, utmaningar och strategier 2016-2022*. Report 2023:9.

As the assessment panels made an overall assessment of the assessment area, shortcomings of this kind might have been accepted and the assessment area still considered to be satisfactory.

Although, at the time of writing, no deeper analysis of the outcomes for specialist nursing training programmes has been conducted, the assessment panel notes that the HEIs work consciously and pedagogically to ensure that students meet the national qualitative targets. Out of the programmes evaluated that were given the assessment *under review*, most of the programmes have specific shortcomings, whereas a few HEIs exhibit more comprehensive shortcomings regarding several qualitative targets. Ten of the programmes that were given the assessment *under review* show shortcomings in the achievement of targets mainly relating to knowledge in the forms of knowledge and understanding⁷⁷ and skills and abilities⁷⁸. Generally, the weaknesses at the various HEIs largely concerned difficulties ensuring the development of skills and abilities during the practical part of programmes.

For three of the programmes, shortcomings in other assessment areas contribute to the programmes been given the assessment *under review*.

A national problem with shortcomings in academic expertise

Based on the assessments made of the programme evaluations carried out, it might be noted that many vocational programmes face challenges with regard to the number of teachers with relevant expertise for programmes. The teachers who actively contribute to a programme and the educational environment built up around it are key prerequisites for students to learn and develop their academic and professional knowledge⁷⁹.

For the teacher training programmes, many PhD holders are included in the lists of teachers submitted by HEIs, but in practice the PhD holders' contributions to the programmes are limited. The evaluations also showed that academic expertise is unevenly distributed between both different HEIs and between and within programmes. The assessment panels for pre-school, primary school and secondary school teacher training programmes say that the level of academic expertise is generally good in the educational science core (ESC). The assessment panel for secondary school teacher training programmes states, however, that the academic expertise is often fragmented when it comes to subjects,

⁷⁷ Qualitative targets common to all specialisations. The targets relate to students' knowledge about the field's academic foundations and awareness of current research and development work, and knowledge about the link between academic studies and proven experience and the link's significance for professional practice.

⁷⁸ Specialisation-specific qualitative targets. There are shortcomings in the achievement of targets in the district nursing and psychiatric care specialisations, while in all the paramedic programmes the targets for the different forms of knowledge are achieved.

⁷⁹ The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Läraryrkesutbildningarna: Kvalitet, utmaningar och strategier 2016-2022*. Report 2023:9.

subject-specific teaching and educational science or teaching expertise linked to actual professional qualifications⁸⁰.

The links to professional practice within the programmes is generally described as being of a good standard. For the vocational teacher training programmes it is noted that a high percentage of the teachers have teaching qualifications themselves. For all the programmes, however, it can be seen that the overall professional expertise is low for precisely the ages or activities that the programmes prepare students for.

For the smaller programmes (with fewer than 100 full-time students in total) evaluated, the shortcomings in the academic environment are linked to the HEIs having few permanently employed teachers with doctorates. The teachers employed often have demanding administrative tasks and limited, or no, time for their own research and skill development. Programmes' research links are instead ensured by consultants hired as researchers. According to the assessors, this makes it more difficult for students to produce independent work as part of existing research projects, and means that an academic environment is not part of students' everyday experience. Dependence on external teachers also risks leading to difficulties with continuity, development and progression, exposing the programmes to vulnerabilities according to the assessment panels. In these programmes, however, the assessment panels find that the links to professional practice and professional expertise are good.

For the specialist nursing training programmes, the assessment panel highlights that in many cases clinical supervisors lack specialist and supervisor training. Furthermore, not all the HEIs have teachers with doctorates in every specialisation, despite many years of efforts. Generally, the teacher density is too low in relation to the teaching task, especially for teachers with doctorates. The assessment panel also finds that the teaching expertise should be strengthened though, and adapted to technological and societal developments and increased digitalisation.

Overall, the evaluations show that both the academic and professional knowledge of teaching staff needs to be developed. More PhD holders are needed who are researchers in the fields of study that are relevant to the programmes.

⁸⁰ The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Läraryrket: Kvalitet, utmaningar och strategier 2016-2022*. Report 2023:9.

Evaluations of third-cycle programmes

Pilot evaluation of third-cycle programmes in 2015–2016

During 2015–2016, a pilot study of the method for evaluating third-cycle programmes was conducted⁸¹. The assessments in the pilot evaluation were on a two-point scale: *high quality* or *under review*. If the outcome of the evaluation was positive, the programme evaluated was then not included in the periodic evaluation. Only programmes given a negative outcome were included.

The aim was to test the method on programmes from different research domains. Overall, 13 third-cycle programme subjects from each of the natural sciences, engineering, medicine, social sciences and humanities research domains were included. A cross- and multi-disciplinary subject and arts subject were also included.

Out of the 13 third-cycle programmes in question, 11 were found to be of high quality. Two of the programmes were given the assessment *under review*.

After the pilot evaluation was completed, changes were made to the guidelines. The changes were based partly on experiences from the pilot evaluation and partly on the changes set out in the government's official communication *Kvalitetssäkring av högre utbildning (2015/16:76)* and the stated prerequisites for UKÄ's national quality assurance system. A number of revisions were also made in 2018. The revisions are described in the Continuous improvement chapter, in the Revision of the guidelines section.

Periodic reviews of third-cycle programmes in 2017–2022

UKÄ evaluated and made decisions about 153 third-cycle programmes in 20 research subjects (which may each contain a number of specific third-cycle programme subjects) in 5 different research subject areas^{82, 83, 84} in 2017–2022. UKÄ's selection method meant that all of the HEIs that offer third-cycle programmes would take part in the review with at least one programme. This resulted in a variation in the number of programmes in

⁸¹ The purpose of the pilot round was to test how well the method functions for both small and large third-cycle programmes in the natural sciences, engineering, medicine, social sciences, humanities and the arts. In addition, UKÄ chose to include some cross- and multi-disciplinary programmes.

⁸² The six research subject areas are natural sciences, engineering, medicine and health sciences, agricultural sciences, social sciences and humanities, including arts research. See *Standard för svensk indelning av forskningsämnen 2011*. Published by the Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ) in 2016.

⁸³ The evaluation of medicine and health sciences programmes that was supposed to start in 2020 was postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

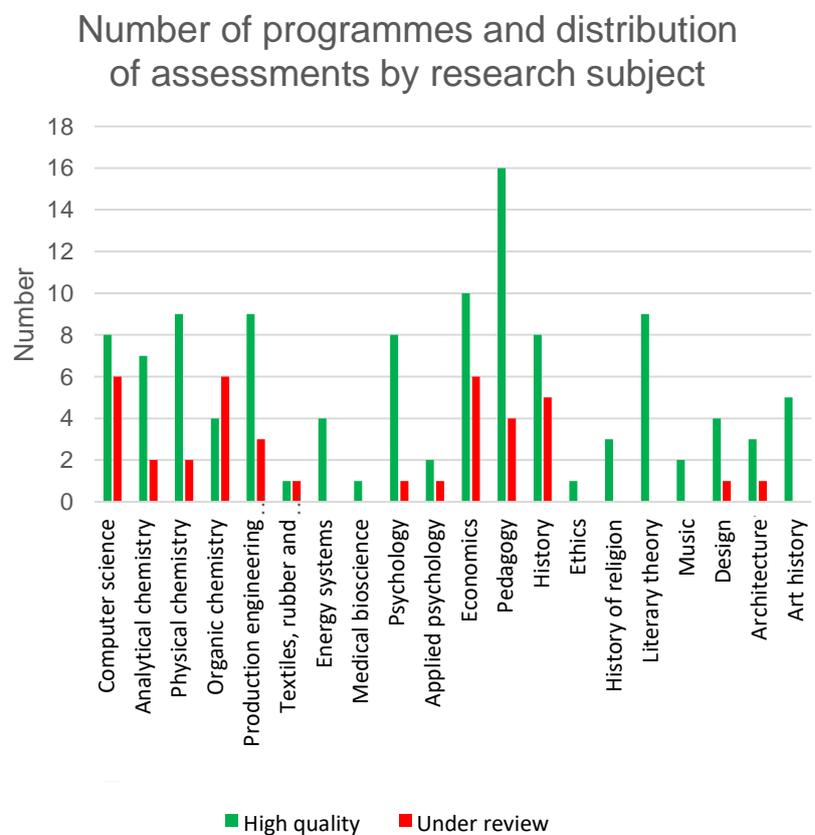
⁸⁴ The research subjects were chosen in a way that ensured that all of the HEIs that offer third-cycle programmes would be included in the evaluation with at least one programme. If a HEI had programmes in several research subject areas, at least one programme would be evaluated from each research subject area. The research subjects selected were supposed to enable a national overview of the current situation and therefore included all of the HEIs that offered programmes in the research subjects chosen.

each research subject area and each research subject. Figure 10 shows the number of programmes evaluated for each research subject.

Key takeaways from the outcomes of the third-cycle programme reviews in 2017–2022

Out of the 153 programmes evaluated, 39 were given the assessment *under review*. The programmes were therefore subject to a follow-up one year after the first assessment. Figure 10 shows the distribution of the assessments by research subject. The outcomes for each of the research subjects separately (data sciences, pedagogy, etc.) are able to give an idea of the quality in each research subject. The figure shows the outcomes for all of the 153 programmes broken down by research subject.

Figure 10. Overall assessments for all of the 153 programmes in the first assessment for each research subject.



What are the HEIs good at and what are the areas in need of improvement?

As can be seen in table 1 shortcomings were identified in the reviews mainly in the assessment areas Prerequisites and Design, teaching/learning and outcomes⁸⁵.

Table 1. Outcomes for each assessment area during 2017–2022 for all of the 153 programmes reviewed in the round of periodic reviews.

Assessment area	Overall assessment	
	Satisfactory	Under review
Prerequisites	131	22
Design, teaching/learning and outcomes	126	27
Follow-up, actions and feedback ⁸⁶	90	5
Gender equality ⁸⁷	89	6
Doctoral student perspective	146	7
Working life and collaboration	150	3

An often satisfactory perspective

The evaluations of third-cycle programmes show that the HEIs, with some specific exceptions, were assessed positively in the Working life and collaboration assessment area. This assessment area concerns whether programmes are useful in the labour market, and how they prepare doctoral students for a constantly evolving working life both in and outside academia. It was noted in a follow-up that the assessment area is relatively narrow given what is actually assessed, compared, for example, with the Prerequisites assessment area, whose content is more multi-faceted⁸⁸. It is therefore less difficult for HEIs to achieve a positive assessment in the working life and collaboration area. A similar reasoning may be applied to the other perspectives. In the follow-up, Working life and collaboration was still the assessment area that was described in the reports as having the most room for improvement. Most commonly, the assessors found that career planning for a job outside academia needed to be improved.

An in-depth analysis of the programme reviews in the analytical chemistry, organic chemistry and physical chemistry research subjects⁸⁹ was conducted to look, among other things, at the strengths of the

⁸⁵ Third-cycle programme subject, staff (which relates to the number of supervisors) and educational environment for researchers were initially included in the Prerequisites assessment area. In the Design, teaching/learning and outcomes assessment area, qualitative targets were selected for evaluation. From 2018, only staff and educational environment for researchers were included in Prerequisites. Follow-up and Gender equality, which were both previously their own assessment areas, were included in Design, teaching/learning and outcomes from 2018.

⁸⁶ Was its own assessment area in round 1 and is now an assessment criterion in the Design, teaching/learning and outcomes assessment area.

⁸⁷ Was its own assessment area in round 1 and is now an assessment criterion in the Design, teaching/learning and outcomes assessment area.

⁸⁸ The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Granskning för utveckling. 95 utvärderade utbildningar på forskarnivå 2017–2018*. Report 2019:1.

⁸⁹ The report was taken from *Kvalitetssäkring och kvalitetsutveckling 2021 Redovisning till regeringen*. Published by the Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ) in 2022.

educational environment. This analysis found that the academic and teaching expertise of supervisors was good, international and national cooperation was common and there was a good level of collaboration with industry. At most of the HEIs included in the review, there was also a well-functioning organisation for the supervision of doctoral students and their work environment, and good opportunities for doctoral students to influence their programmes. That there were good post-doctorate work opportunities for doctoral students was also highlighted as a positive factor in the evaluations of the three chemistry subjects.

Small educational environments were often given the assessment *under review*

A first analysis of the outcomes of the reviews was conducted in 2019⁹⁰. This showed that there was a large variation in the number of doctoral students for the different subjects. Out of the 123 third-cycle programmes that had been evaluated at the time, the number of doctoral students actively enrolled in programmes varied from the occasional individual to up to a hundred students. Of greater interest was that the analysis indicated that a little over half of the programmes evaluated had 10 doctoral students at most.

As a result, an in-depth analysis was conducted of the programmes with few active doctoral students. 29 programmes were given the assessment *under review* out of a total of 123. Of these 29 programmes, 24 had fewer than ten doctoral students. The assessment *under review*, which was much more common for small educational environments, could be explained in several ways. Firstly, the small educational environments had too small a range of courses, and secondly there was a shortage of supervisors and a limited research environment in general (with affiliated researchers, for example). However, the analysis also showed several good examples of how such an issue was managed by HEIs.

A broad knowledge and understanding of subjects was often lacking

In addition to small educational environments, it was also noted that the assessment criterion that doctoral students should gain a broad knowledge and understanding of their subject was the decisive factor in many evaluations. This applied to varying degrees, however, depending on the subject evaluated. In the subjects chemistry and economics, a third of the programmes failed to fulfil this assessment criterion, for example. This was in line with the fact that many of the areas in need of improvement stated in the reports fell within the programme content theme. More specifically, the assessors referred to course content, individual study plans (ISP) and seminars.

⁹⁰ The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Små forskarutbildningsmiljöer. Utmaningar och framgångsfaktorer*. Report 17 (2019).

The in-depth analysis of the evaluations of third-cycle programmes in the research subjects analytical chemistry, organic chemistry and physical chemistry⁹¹ stressed the need for HEIs to review how broad knowledge of degree subjects should be achieved. Creating better opportunities for doctoral students to take relevant courses and take part in relevant seminar series was viewed by the assessment panels as an important improvement measure. The assessment panels emphasised that it can be a good idea for HEIs to join forces, for example through a national graduate school, to create joint courses, as the educational environments for researchers in the different chemistry specialisations are sometimes small.

Doctoral students sometimes have different types of employment arrangements and backgrounds. Doctoral students may be financed by grants or be employed as industrial doctoral students. Their backgrounds may mean that they cannot be taught in Swedish. Given the above, the assessment panels identified a need to make sure that all doctoral students, regardless of how they are financed or of their linguistic knowledge of Swedish, are equally able to achieve all the qualitative targets in the System of Qualifications.

The shortcomings vary depending on the subject

A general reflection on the outcomes of the reviews is that there is a large variation between outcomes for the overall assessment in different subjects. In literary theory (8 HEIs) all the programmes were assessed as *high quality*, for example. In organic chemistry (10 HEIs), half of the programmes were found to be of *high quality*, failures to meet Knowledge and understanding criteria being the most common reason for the final assessment. In computer science (14 HEIs) around half of the programmes were also assessed as high quality (8 programmes). In this last case, the gender equality perspective fell short instead⁹².

Follow-up of programmes under review

If a programme has been given the assessment *under review* in a periodic programme evaluation, this means that UKÄ questions the HEI's degree-awarding powers for the programme evaluated. HEIs whose programmes were given the assessment *under review* must submit a report on the measures taken to UKÄ within one year of its decision at the latest.

A HEI may also choose to discontinue the programme under review. In this case, the HEI must submit the decision to discontinue the

⁹¹ The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Kvalitetssäkring och kvalitetsutveckling 2021, 2022 Report*.

⁹² It is notable that in the evaluation of production engineering, occupational science and ergonomics, 6 out of the 12 programmes were assessed as unsatisfactory from a gender equality perspective. However, as this perspective was no longer its own assessment area from 2018, but was included in Design, teaching/learning and outcomes, the assessors found that, overall, the shortcomings did not mean that the subsequent assessment area should be viewed as unsatisfactory.

programme to UKÄ by the last day for the submission of the report on the measures taken.

The follow-up process is the same regardless of the programme level. The basis for the follow-up is the HEI's report. In the report on measures taken, the HEI reports on the measures implemented for the assessment area or areas not found to be satisfactory. The assessment panel may choose to suggest the holding of an interview. Based on the assessment panel's report, UKÄ decides to give the programme a high quality assessment or decides that the degree-awarding powers should be revoked.

For independent higher education providers and the Swedish Defence University and the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences it is the government that makes the decision to revoke degree-awarding powers.⁹³

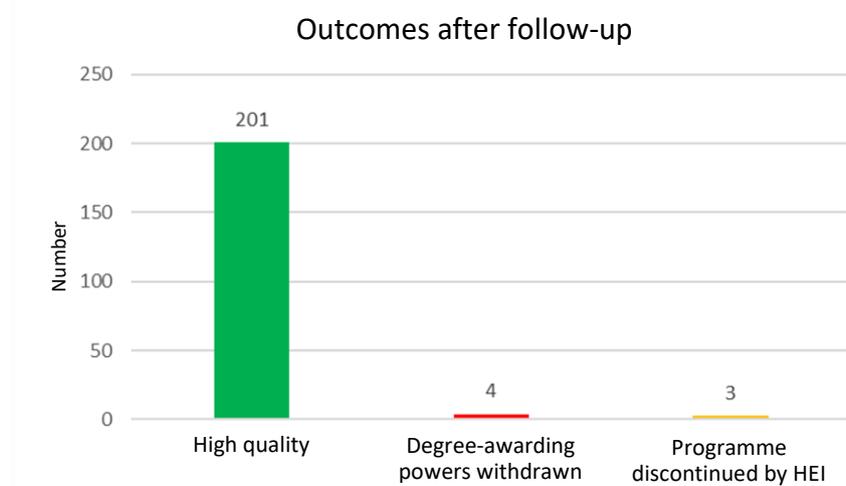
Follow-up of first-cycle and second-cycle programmes

Out of the 99 programmes that were given the overall assessment *under review* in the periodic evaluations, 82 of the programmes have so far been followed up. Of these, the HEI decided to discontinue three programmes before UKÄ's follow-up started and UKÄ revoked four degree-awarding powers. The other 75 programmes are now considered to be of *high quality*.

In addition, the government revoked degree-awarding powers for a psychotherapist qualification as the HEI did not submit data for assessment in connection with UKÄ's evaluation. In summer/autumn 2023, UKÄ will follow-up on four programmes under review. The specialist nursing training programmes that were given the assessment *under review* in spring 2023 will be followed up in 2024 and are not included below.

⁹³ The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Vägledning för uppföljning av utbildningar med ifrågasatt kvalitet – Utbildningsutvärderingar på grundnivå och avancerad nivå samt forskarnivå*. 2018, revised in 2020.

Figure 11. Total outcomes after follow-up of programmes given the assessment *under review* in periodic programme evaluations



For first-cycle and second-cycle programmes, it has only been possible to follow-up on teacher training programmes. The following is an overall summary of the measures taken by HEIs to remedy shortcomings in teacher training programmes. For a complete picture, see the individual reports, or the reports on measures taken.

As stated above, the programmes fall short mainly in the ensuring of the achievement of objectives by students and the teachers' academic expertise. Consequently, there are also shortcomings in programmes' connections to research. Several ways to develop the research connection are presented, relating to both programme content and the number of teachers with relevant expertise.

Work on constructive alignment and progression are common measures

The alignment of learning activities, learning objectives, examinations and qualitative targets is commonly known as constructive alignment. Work on constructive alignment and progression was the most common measure to address shortcomings linked to the ensuring of the achievement of objectives. Measures linked to revising programme structures to increase students' ability to make academic progress as a result of the programmes are also common. In secondary school teacher training programmes, measures to develop and improve subject-specific teaching content were common, for example reviews and analyses of course plans often led to revisions.⁹⁴ The revisions improved the teaching and examinations in relation to the qualitative targets.

⁹⁴ The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Läraryrket: Kvalitet, utmaningar och strategier 2016-2022*. Report 2023:9.

Increasing of the number of teachers with relevant expertise

The most common measure for addressing shortcomings in teachers' academic expertise was to increase the number of teachers with this expertise. The increase in academically qualified teachers was achieved in various ways, for example through new recruitment, the development of existing staff's expertise, more calls for applications for research posts and cooperation with PhD holders at other institutions within HEIs.

Revoked degree-awarding powers

After the follow-ups had been completed, including reports on measures taken, additional information and interviews, according to the assessment panels, some shortcomings remained for four of the programmes reviewed. The shortcomings related to a pre-school teacher training programme and a primary school teacher training programme with a specialisation in after-school centres, and two secondary school teacher training programmes with a specialisation in upper secondary school maths. After the follow-up, UKÄ decided to withdraw the degree-awarding powers for these four programmes.

For the programme leading to a pre-school teacher qualification, the shortcoming that the learning objectives were not satisfactorily designed, taught/learned and ensured remained. The assessment panel stated that there lacked a clear alignment between qualitative targets, learning objectives, learning activities, examinations and grading criteria. This created a lack of clarity regarding the students' progress as a result of the programmes.

For the programme leading to a primary school teacher qualification with a specialisation in after-school centres, the shortcoming remained that the after-school centre teaching expertise was insufficient and that academic expertise was not ensured over the short or long term. The assessment panel noted that there lacked strategic objective-focused work on the areas that needed improving in the after-school centre teaching area. It was also not apparent how students were given access to after-school centre teaching research and how the programme was connected to research.

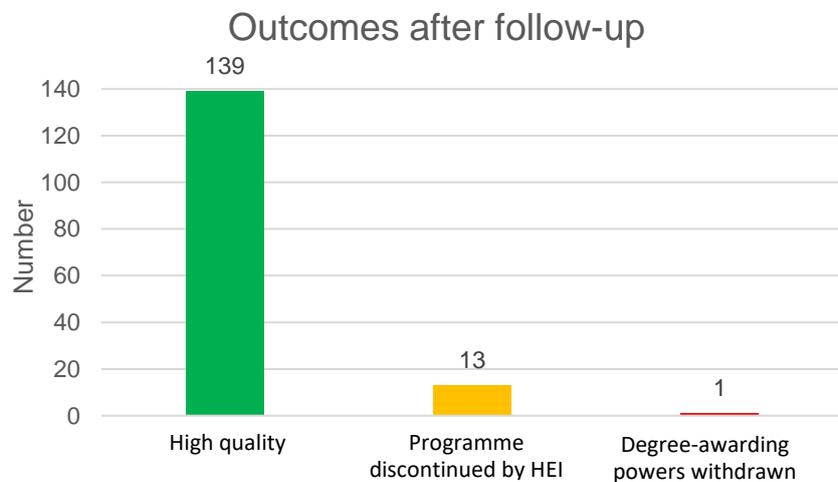
For the programmes leading to a secondary school qualification with a specialisation in upper secondary school maths, the assessment panel criticised the shortage of expertise in the teaching of mathematics and stated that students were not assured an introduction to the teaching of mathematics that was both broad and deep. The assessment panel also said that the pool of teachers as a whole lacks the in-depth subject knowledge required to be able to follow the subject's academic development, develop second-cycle maths courses, independently conduct maths research and represent a research-based approach to mathematics, within the framework of the teaching of mathematics. One of the HEIs was also criticised as its strategic work at management level did not sufficiently succeed in

reinforcing and ensuring the necessary expertise in the teaching of mathematics that is required to plan and teach secondary school teacher training programmes with a specialisation in upper secondary school maths. There were also shortcomings in the planning and teaching of courses on the teaching of maths.

Follow-up of third-cycle programmes

A total of 39 out of the 153 programmes evaluated were given the assessment *under review* during the 2017–2022 period⁹⁵. For 25 of these programmes, the HEIs worked on measures that led to high quality. The HEIs chose to discontinue the programmes in 13 cases. At one HEI, the assessment *under review* led to degree-awarding powers being withdrawn. It should be noted that the discontinuation of a third-cycle programme subject can mean that the subject is integrated within another broader subject through internal reorganisation. Doctoral students and affiliated supervisors are in this way able to stay at the HEI. In some cases the discontinuation of a subject was also due to there being limited activity in the subject as there were few doctoral students, i.e. the occasional individual, or because there was not much activity in the subject overall.

Figure 12. Total outcomes in April 2023 after periodic evaluations and follow-up.



⁹⁵ The two programmes that were given the assessment *under review* in the pilot review of third-cycle programmes would have been followed up as part of the periodic evaluation cycle for the quality reviewing of third-cycle programmes. The medical and health sciences programme was supposed to start in 2020, but the evaluation was postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. One third-cycle programme in chemistry at a HEI involved in the pilot study was included in periodic programme evaluations.

Measures⁹⁶ include hiring more teachers/supervisors and expanding the educational environment for doctoral students

Third-cycle programmes that were given the assessment *under review* were most often assessed as unsatisfactory in the Prerequisites and Design, teaching/learning and outcomes assessment areas. The third-cycle programme follow-ups show that some of the most common measures were to increase the number of teachers with relevant expertise, recruit more doctoral students, offer more third-cycle programme courses, increase seminar activities, integrate gender equality in programmes and work in a more structured way on individual study plans and other types of follow-ups.

A few different examples of measures to increase the number of teachers with relevant expertise may be noted. In some cases this involved recruiting new teachers. In a couple of cases, internal supervisors are now used instead of external supervisors, and the supervisors have relevant subject backgrounds. In one case, the guest professor for a subject was given more resources. Measures are sometimes specific to a certain subject. For one third-cycle programme subject all the HEIs made changes to the general study plan so that they could cover the obligatory knowledge requirements existing in accordance with national and international standards.

For the Doctoral student perspective and Working life and collaboration, measures include increased planning of third-cycle programmes and more collaboration

A few programmes were followed up in the Doctoral student perspective assessment area, as this area led to questioning during the first review. The measures that HEIs introduced include the development of work on third-cycle programme follow-up, the introduction of a doctoral student council and the production of a handbook for researchers with guidelines for supervisor relations and practical information about programme content and doctoral students' rights.

A smaller number of programmes were also followed up in the Working life and collaboration assessment area. The measures in this area included increasing internal collaboration with other faculties, increasing cooperation with industry and, in some cases, giving doctoral students greater responsibility for laboratory equipment.

Degree-awarding powers withdrawn in one case

In the case where degree-awarding powers were withdrawn, a shortcoming remained in how the HEI ensured the quality of the courses given within the framework of a HEI-wide doctoral student network. Although the HEIs within the network took measures to increase

⁹⁶ The report is based UKÄ's feedback report to the government for the years 2019–2021.

continuity and ensure the quality of the courses, the assessment panel found that the programme was entirely dependent on the doctoral student network. The prerequisites were therefore judged to be inadequate.

Appraisals of degree-awarding powers

The purpose of appraisals of degree-awarding powers is to assess whether a programme provider has the necessary prerequisites for students to achieve the qualitative targets set by parliament and the government in the System of Qualifications for the qualification that the programme should lead to⁹⁷. Before the national system for quality assurance was introduced, the guidelines' content was reviewed and the related assessment areas and assessment criteria as a whole. The appraisal process itself was also reviewed based on past experience, from the submission of applications to final decisions. New guidelines for the appraisal of degree-awarding powers became applicable for applications submitted from 1 January 2017⁹⁸.

The introduction of gender equality, student and working life perspectives also for appraisals of degree-awarding powers led to an increase in the number of assessment criteria. An assessment criterion was also added to the guidelines that was taken verbatim from the following section in Chapter 11 of the Higher Education Act (1992:1434):

13 § An authorisation to award qualifications may be issued only if it is in the public interest, from a national perspective, for the qualifications to be awarded.

A focus on the achievement of qualitative targets

Another consequence was a more pronounced focus on assessing the achievement of the qualitative targets in the System of Qualifications. This was with a view to equivalence with programme evaluations, where the achievement of targets would be central. Other assessment criteria in the guidelines that concerned the number of teachers with relevant expertise, the research environment, finances and infrastructure had their wording somewhat revised, to align them with the wording of the other components.

⁹⁷ The qualifications that HEIs must apply for authorisation to award are governed by Chapter 1 of the Higher Education Act and the Act (1993:792) on authorisation to award certain qualifications. Universities only need to apply for authorisation for professional qualifications and arts degrees. They are generally authorised to award all other types of qualifications, such as higher education diplomas, bachelor's degrees, magister degrees, master's degrees, licentiate degrees and doctoral degrees. State university colleges must apply for authorisation for professional qualifications, arts degrees and master's degrees, licentiate degrees and doctoral degrees in certain areas. They are generally authorised to award higher education diplomas, bachelor's degrees and magister degrees. State university colleges for the arts must apply for authorisation for professional qualifications, arts degrees, magister degrees and master's degrees, licentiate degrees and doctoral degrees in certain areas. They only have general authorisation to award higher education diplomas and bachelor's degrees. Independent higher education providers must apply for authorisation for all types of qualifications.

⁹⁸ The assessment criteria are described in UKÄ's guidelines with appendices for the appraisal of degree-awarding powers.

Two rounds of applications and extended time for appraisals

From 2017, the number of application deadlines was increased to two a year, in March and October. Having two application deadlines gave HEIs another chance to submit their applications. To make the process more efficient, the possibility for HEIs to give prior notifications of applications well in advance was also introduced. This would allow UKÄ to begin the recruitment of assessors at an early stage in the review process.

In the years preceding 2017, there was some discussion of whether it was reasonable to ask that a programme had all the prerequisites in place before authorisation was given. The number of teachers with relevant expertise was particularly critical. In 2015, UKÄ investigated whether it was possible to change its practices, for example so that minor shortcomings could be addressed within the framework of the first application process. After a discussion of the investigation's proposals, the conclusion was that the basic principles for the appraisal of degree-awarding powers would be maintained, since they were tried and tested and worked well, but a change to the principles governing the authority's position-taking on expert reports should be considered.

The change means that, in exceptional cases, it might be reasonable for UKÄ to decide to increase the time allowed for an appraisal, if this was recommended by the experts, and in this way give the applicants more time to submit specific additional information. An important basis for this adjustment to the decision-making procedure was that exceptions would only be admissible if the measures for remedying shortcomings were considered to be feasible within a reasonable time. The time allowed for the submission of additional information was therefore set at six months.

Key takeaways from the outcomes of appraisals of degree-awarding powers in 2017–2022

During the cycle, UKÄ processed 85 applications, of which 31 applications from independent healthcare providers and the remaining 54 from state HEIs. Applications for authorisation to award professional qualifications were the most common, with a total of 51 applications. Only three applications during the period were for arts degrees. In total, 36 applications were rejected (42%) and 49 (58%) were approved. Applications from individual higher education providers were rejected to a greater extent than applications from state HEIs, at 68% compared with 28%. Most rejections were attributable to the assessment criterion concerning how HEIs ensure that students achieve qualitative targets. The number of teachers with relevant expertise and HEIs' descriptions of fields of study and main fields of study fell short in several applications.

Table 2. Applications approved and rejected in 2018–2022. Type of qualification. Number and percentage.

Qualification	Approved	Rejected	Percentage approved	Percentage rejected	Total number
Professional qualifications	33	18	65%	35%	51
Higher education diploma	0	2	0%	100%	2
Bachelor's degree	1	2	33%	67%	3
Bachelor of arts degree	0	1	0%	100%	1
Magister degree	3	3	50%	50%	6
Master's degree	4	5	44%	56%	9
Master of arts degree	1	0	100%	0%	1
Licenciate or doctoral degree	6	5	55%	45%	11
Arts licenciate or doctoral degree	1	0	100%	0%	1
Total (number)	49	36	58%	42%	85

There were the most rejections for the assessment criterion achievement of qualitative targets

Rejections were the result of shortcomings in one or more assessment areas. However, with a few exceptions, the applications that were rejected, as shown in table 2, were found to be *unsatisfactory* with regard to the achievement of qualitative targets assessment criterion. This assessment criterion was given a prominent place in the current guidelines. This is because the achievement of qualitative targets is often highlighted as the outcome objective that all of the programmes' constituent components are aimed at achieving. The guidelines state, among other things, that applicant HEIs should “describe and analyse how the programme's design shows progress and an alignment between qualitative targets, learning objectives, learning activities and examinations⁹⁹.”

The assessment criterion therefore contains many parts that must each be described by the applicant HEI, in the programme policy document, and in the body of the application generally.

The fact that the achievement of qualitative targets has its own assessment criterion with detailed instructions of course attracts the attention of assessors. This can be clearly seen when the assessors request additional information for applications. Most of the additional information concerns the achievement of qualitative targets and the related policy documents. The possibility of extending the appraisal time

⁹⁹ The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Vägledning för ansökan om tillstånd att utfärda generell och konstnärlig högskoleexamen, kandidatexamen och magisterexamen*. 2018, page 5.

emerges as a way of adjusting programme content. With regard to the extension option introduced, many believed that it might be used to recruit more teachers. This wasn't often seen in the material though and was only occasionally the case.

Difficulty meeting the staff and programme content assessment criteria

Many applications were also rejected due to the assessment criteria relating to the number of teachers with relevant expertise. This assessment criterion is relatively detailed and states that both academic and teaching expertise is required, and, for professional qualifications, professional expertise also. Time for research and other skill development is emphasised. The prerequisites for this must also be in place over both the short and long term.

The assessment criterion regarding the content of fields of study, main fields of study and professional qualifications and their relevance also led to many rejections. At second-cycle and third-cycle level there are strict requirements for the field of study applied for the awarding of qualifications. The field must be clearly defined and consistent with the HEI's research and programmes, and also be relevant from a national perspective. To be given authorisation at second- or third-cycle level some degree of profiling is usually required. This means that the field of study may be justified by the fact that it often doesn't exist at other HEIs. With profiling, new clear and distinct field and subject definitions are required, however. This has consequences for how the new field and subject are assessed, and sometimes leads to the rejection of the application.

The assessment criteria student perspective and resources are nearly always satisfactory

There were also assessment criteria that were nearly always given a positive outcome, namely resources (other than teachers, e.g. premises and libraries) and the student and doctoral student perspective. Even if an application as a whole is rejected, these requirements are nearly always met. For the student and doctoral student perspective, in many cases (at larger HEIs), when appraisals of degree-awarding powers are conducted, it is a question of how the perspective is catered for overall in related programmes. It is also difficult to assess the student perspective for a programme that hasn't yet started, including because it isn't possible to interview students about the actual programme. A larger HEI will also have library resources and teaching premises in place before submitting an application, just as it will have an active student influence. Another explanation may be that larger HEIs already have these prerequisites in place since they already run programmes in other fields of study. The outcomes also show, however, that HEIs without previous,

or with limited, educational activities, complied to a large extent with the resource and student influence requirements.

New programmes for dental hygienists, doctors and healthcare counsellors resulted in more applications

The programme for a dental hygienist qualification was extended, starting from 1 January 2019, from a two-year to a three-year programme. This meant that all the HEIs that offered the two-year programme (seven HEIs) had to apply for a new authorisation to offer the three-year programme. Furthermore, on 1 July 2019 a professional qualification was introduced for healthcare counsellors, and the basis of the qualification system should in principle be a new healthcare counsellor training programme. This meant that UKÄ received ten applications to award this qualification. Finally, the design of medical degree programmes was partially changed, with a new degree description that led to medical degree programmes also being extended from five and a half to six years, leading to the HEIs (seven HEIs) having to apply again to award this degree.

Independent higher education providers have more applications rejected

Applications from independent higher education providers were rejected more often. As the number of applications per year from independent higher education providers is usually no more than a handful, the result may be greatly affected by individual HEIs' applications. During the current period, for example, one independent higher education provider applied six times for authorisation to award different professional qualifications, which is unusual from a historical perspective.

Comparisons of the number of applications from independent and state HEIs are also problematic as, legally, independent HEIs must apply for every type of qualification. Many professional qualification applications during the period were applications for authorisation to award medical degrees and dental hygienist qualifications. These are programmes that many state higher education providers have already offered for some time, which is something that benefited them in the application process as they had certain prerequisites in place. There is nevertheless still a tendency for independent higher education providers to find it more difficult to get their applications approved. There has also been a slight increase in the number of applications from independent higher education providers during the current period.

Thematic evaluations

The purpose of these thematic evaluations is above all development, and they do not lead to any sanctions for universities or university colleges. When an evaluation is complete it presents a national picture, while also offering feedback for every university and university college.

Method

The method for the thematic evaluations is adapted to the theme in question, but should be in line with the methods applied to other components of the national quality assurance system as far as possible.

The first thematic evaluation, sustainable development, used a method that was more similar to UKÄ's other reviews, as all the aspect areas except gender equality were included. Starting from the evaluation of widening participation, a number of evaluation questions were put into two assessment areas: Governance and organisation and Design, teaching/learning and outcomes. The method was also developed to a large degree in consultation with stakeholders, in order to design evaluations that were as relevant and targeted as possible. Among other things, UKÄ set up an advisory group prior to the method development process, to share expertise and experiences relevant to the evaluation.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰¹

An important part of thematic evaluations is the feedback conferences that HEIs are invited to so that they can share their experiences.¹⁰² For the review of sustainable development there was no follow-up in addition to the feedback conference. After the review of widening participation, two years after the review HEIs must submit a report on the measures that they have taken to manage the graded recommendations. For the evaluation of nursing qualifications, the report on the measures taken must be submitted after one year.

The way in which assessments were given was also changed during the cycle. Two assessment levels were used in the sustainable development evaluation:

- The HEI has a well-developed process for working on sustainable development within programmes.
- The HEI's process for working on sustainable development within programmes needs to be developed.

In the two thematic evaluations widening participation and evaluation of nursing qualifications, no overall assessment was given. Instead, the assessment panels gave graded recommendations for what the respective HEIs should and can do in their work based on the evaluation questions that the HEIs had responded to in their self-evaluations.

¹⁰⁰ The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Vägledning för tematisk utvärdering av breddad rekrytering*. 2020, Ref. No 411-00545-19.

¹⁰¹ The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Vägledning för tematisk utvärdering av utbildning som leder till sjuksköterskeexamen*. 2021, Ref. No 411-00445-20.

¹⁰² See the feedback conferences section in the Continuous follow-up chapter.

Outcomes

Sustainable development¹⁰³

The evaluation of how universities and university colleges work to promote sustainable development was carried out ten years after the inclusion of the relevant section in the Higher Education Act. The assessment panel noted that most HEIs could give examples of courses or programmes in which sustainable development had been integrated. However, they saw that only around half of them had HEI-wide sustainable development objectives in place, and even fewer systematically followed up on the objectives or took measures to develop their teachers' expertise.

Three fourths of the HEIs did not meet the criteria set. They were assessed as needing to develop their processes. An example of such processes that should be developed is setting HEI-wide sustainable development objectives, more systematically following up on objectives or developing measures to develop teachers' sustainable development expertise. Only around one fourth of the HEIs were found to have a "well-developed process" for working on sustainable development within programmes.¹⁰⁴ The assessment panel therefore stated that the HEIs' measures to promote sustainable development must be clearer and implemented faster. The assessment panel emphasised the management's responsibility to work on sustainable development in a conscious and committed way. As sustainable development is a constantly ongoing process, the assessment panel was also able to note that all the HEIs have a continued need for development regardless of the overall assessment that they were given in the review.

Widening participation¹⁰⁵

In the interests of the efficient use of resources, the evaluation was limited to only covering HEIs that had at least 100 full-time students during the academic year 2018/19.

Most of the HEIs interpreted the assignment to mean the active promotion of widening participation according to their own prerequisites based on groups that were under-represented at the HEIs. However, in most cases there was no description of any analysis that preceded this interpretation. Most specified target groups, but these were rarely

¹⁰³ The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Universitets och högskolors arbete med att främja en hållbar utveckling En tematisk utvärdering, del 1*. Report 2017:12.

¹⁰⁴ Vinnova conducted a continuation of UKÄ's evaluation of universities' and university colleges' measures to promote sustainable development to investigate the progress with Agenda 2030 in universities and university colleges. A document- and interview-based study was completed of the twelve HEIs evaluated that were assessed as "the HEI has a well-developed process for working on sustainable development within programmes". The report is called *Mycket görs, mycket mer måste göras. Universitet och högskolors bidrag till hållbar utveckling*. Report VR 2019:06.

¹⁰⁵ The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Tematisk utvärdering av universitets och högskolors arbete med att främja och bredda rekryteringen till högskolan*. 2022, Ref. No 411-00545-19.

defined and distinct, making it more difficult for the HEI to take appropriate action, follow it up and evaluate the results.

A few HEIs had a current action plan for widening participation. Some said that they had had an action plan, but that work on widening participation had now been integrated with other strategic measures. Most of the HEIs had defined some form of framework and prerequisites for working on widening participation, but there were shortcomings in how the HEIs carried out this work.

The assessment panel stated that the issue of responsibility was the biggest challenge when it comes to frameworks and prerequisites for work on widening participation. Only a handful of HEIs had a clear division of responsibilities for this work. There were HEIs that had no coordinating functions at all and that therefore missed out on important transfers of knowledge between different parts of the organisation.

The assessment panel found that follow-up was a consistent area in need of improvement, which many HEIs were aware of. A majority of the HEIs lacked a systematic follow-up process and did not conduct in-depth analyses. Integrating work on widening participation in HEIs' quality systems may facilitate systematisation, and probably make it easier to capitalise on experiences and lessons learned from measures aimed at widening participation.

Nursing degrees¹⁰⁶

When nursing programmes were evaluated in 2014, the evaluation showed, among other things, the need to further review the practical part of programmes.¹⁰⁷ UKÄ therefore chose to build on the previous programme evaluation results by focusing on a few qualitative targets that students must achieve relating to knowledge in the form of skills and abilities. In the thematic evaluation of programmes leading to a nursing degree, UKÄ reviewed how the HEIs work to ensure that students achieve selected qualitative targets regarding skill and ability for programmes leading to a nursing degree. 24 HEIs were included in the evaluation.¹⁰⁸ Self-evaluations and discussions during the evaluation clearly showed common and national challenges and needs for the HEIs. There is therefore a convergence in the areas in need of improvement identified. Competency planning, for example, is a common challenge for all the HEIs, where there is an area in need of improvement consisting of long-term strategic competency planning. In this regard,

¹⁰⁶ The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Tematisk utvärdering av utbildning som leder till sjuksköterskeexamen*. 2022, Ref. No 411-00253-21

¹⁰⁷ The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Bedömargruppens yttrande över nationell kvalitetsutvärdering 2013 av sjuksköterskeexamen*. 2014, Ref. No 411-00339-13.

¹⁰⁸ The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Vägledning för tematisk utvärdering av utbildning som leder till sjuksköterskeexamen*. 2021, Ref. No 411-00445-20.

it is important that the HEIs identify their specific needs and prepare competency plans that are continuously followed up.

Another common challenge is ensuring that there are enough high-quality clinical placements for nursing training programmes. To meet this challenge, the HEIs and healthcare organisations need to establish collaboration agreements and clarify their shared responsibility for clinical placements and their quality, which must be borne by both parties jointly.

Summary

During the current cycle a total of 42 periodic reviews of HEIs' quality assurance processes for programmes were decided on. Out of these, 9 HEIs (21%) were found to have approved quality assurance processes, 29 (69%) were approved with reservations, and 4 HEIs (10%) were given the assessment *under review*.

At the start of the cycle, it became apparent that in many cases the HEIs were working on developing their quality systems, which means that not all of the systems' parts had been tested in practice at the time of the review, and the self-initiated programme evaluations had not yet begun. An assessment criterion that many HEIs (17) didn't meet concerned the development of programmes by drawing on continuous follow-ups – which include course evaluations – and periodic reviews. This assessment criterion is clearly linked to the quality system and the degree to which it is focused and systematic enough to ensure the quality of programmes, and whether it has been tested enough to conclude that it is able to ensure the programmes' quality. The assessment areas Prerequisites and Working Life and collaboration were the areas most often found to be satisfactory.

A total of eight reviews of HEIs' quality assurance processes for research were decided on. Most of the HEIs were approved with reservations (six out of the eight HEIs). Although the development of quality assurance processes for research is a new activity for HEIs, the reviews show that the majority of the HEIs have a mostly well-functioning quality system for research as well. Most of them ensure that they continuously follow-up, analyse and use information that has a bearing on research quality and relevance. With some exceptions, HEIs also systematically work to promote good research practice and prevent and manage research-related misconduct. The areas in need of improvement that the assessment teams identified differ between reviews.

18 institutional reviews have so far been followed up, including 2 relating to research. The most common measures that the HEIs reported were producing or updating policy documents and procedures, making changes to management structures and meeting formats and improving communication. Other common measures taken include improving follow-up and evaluation.

A total of 225 first-cycle and second-cycle programmes were evaluated. The majority lead to various teaching or specialist nursing qualifications. Of the programmes assessed, 126 (56%) were found to be of a high quality and 99 (44%) were given the assessment *under review*. The Student perspective and Working life and collaboration assessment areas were the areas most often found to be satisfactory, and also Prerequisites in the majority of cases. Design, teaching/learning and outcomes were the assessment areas that were the most often found to be unsatisfactory. The shortcomings most often related to the ensuring of the achievement of qualitative targets and the number of teachers with relevant expertise.

For first-cycle and second-cycle programmes, it was only possible to follow-up on teacher training programmes. Work on constructive alignment and progression was the most common measure to address shortcomings linked to the ensuring of the achievement of objectives. When it comes to shortcomings in the academic expertise of staff, increasing the number of teachers with relevant expertise was the most common measure.

153 third-cycle programmes were evaluated. A total of one quarter of the programmes (39) were given the assessment *under review*. There was a large variation in the outcomes for different subjects, but some trends can be seen in the data. Small educational environments with a limited range of courses and a lack of supervisors are over-represented in the programmes under review. The assessment criterion that doctoral students should gain a broad knowledge and understanding of their subject is the decisive factor in many evaluations. The assessment of the perspectives rarely results in a programme being given the assessment *under review*.

After the end of the evaluation cycle, 25 third-cycle programmes given the assessment *under review* had addressed the shortcomings. Thirteen programmes were discontinued and one degree-awarding authorisation was withdrawn. Measures include hiring more teachers and supervisors and expanding the educational environment for doctoral students.

With regard to appraisals of degree-awarding powers, three new dental hygienist, medical and healthcare counsellor programmes resulted in many new applications. During the cycle, UKÄ processed 85 applications, of which 31 applications from independent healthcare providers and the remaining 54 from state HEIs. In total, 36 applications were rejected (42%) and 49 (58%) were approved. Independent higher education providers were rejected to a greater extent than state HEIs. The assessment criterion the achievement of qualitative targets generally led to the most rejections. Many applications were also rejected due to the assessment criteria relating to the number of teachers with relevant expertise.

Three thematic evaluations were conducted during the cycle. The purpose of these evaluations is above all development, and they do not

lead to any sanctions for universities and university colleges. The sustainable development evaluation shows that most HEIs could give examples of courses or programmes in which sustainable development had been integrated, but only around half of them had HEI-wide sustainable development objectives in place, and even fewer systematically followed up on the objectives or took measures to develop their teachers' expertise. The evaluation of widening participation shows that most of the HEIs had interpreted the assignment to mean the active promotion of widening participation according to their own prerequisites based on groups that were under-represented at the HEIs, but also that there this is a lack of systematic follow-up and in-depth analyses of HEIs' work towards widening participation. In the evaluation of nursing degrees, UKÄ reviewed how HEIs work to ensure that students achieve qualitative targets regarding selected skills and abilities. The results show that competency planning is a common challenge for all the HEIs, where there is an area in need of improvement consisting of long-term strategic competency planning. Another common challenge is ensuring that there are enough clinical placements.

Globally speaking, the achievement of qualitative targets was a common challenge identified in both programme evaluations and appraisals of degree-awarding powers. To a certain degree, this is connected with the shortage of academic expertise for the programmes reviewed. At the same time, in many cases the institutional reviews showed that the conducting of self-evaluations of programmes hadn't come far enough for their assessment to be possible, or that there were shortcomings with regard to programme improvement actions.

Continuous improvement

As mentioned in the introduction to this report, the national quality assurance system was followed up and continuously improved throughout the cycle. In practical terms, the follow-up process involved a range of activities. One way of finding out whether the national quality assurance system contributes to the quality enhancement of HEIs is to describe the measures taken when reviews are followed up. A summary of these measures is presented in the previous chapter for each component. Another way of measuring the effects is to ask the HEIs' for their opinions on whether the reviews were quality enhancing. This was achieved through surveys or feedback conferences arranged a few months after most reviews. In addition to the external activities, internal seminars were held and various forms of thematic analyses were also conducted. In some cases, the continuous follow-up led to minor adjustments to the guidelines.

During a large part of the period extensive improvement measures were also ongoing, aimed at defining a method for the reviewing of quality assurance processes for research. This is briefly presented in the chapter on outcomes and experiences, and described in greater depth in UKÄ's reports on its methodological work.

Throughout the cycle, there was coordination with UKÄ's two reference groups, one consisting of employer and labour market representatives and the other of SUHF and SFS representatives. UKÄ also has an internal advisory group through which issues were raised and highlighted from an international perspective.

In this chapter we summarise the feedback that arose from the reviews through surveys and feedback conferences. We then summarise some of the thematic analyses that UKÄ initiated. Finally, we describe how the guidelines were changed during the cycle.

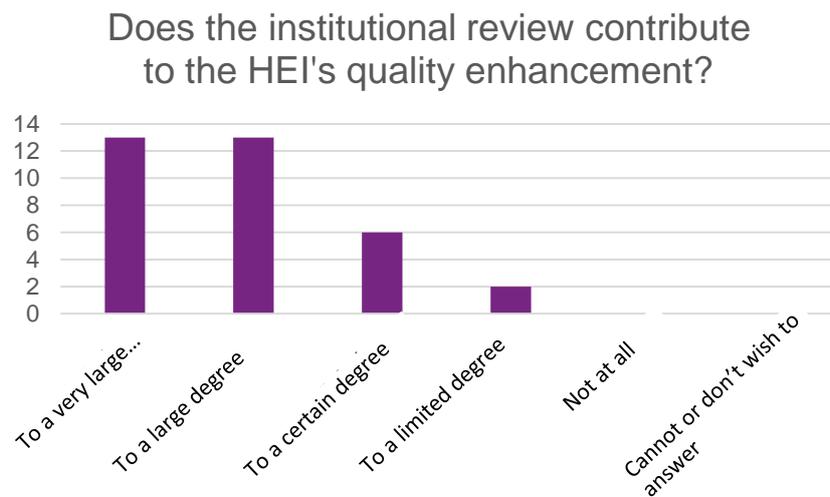
Surveys

After the reviews, surveys were sent out to the HEIs and assessors who took part in them. Only the responses from the HEIs' contact people are presented here, as it is the surveys that contain the question about whether the reviews were quality enhancing.

Responses to surveys about institutional reviews of programmes¹⁰⁹

The response rate for the survey sent to 35 contact people in rounds 1 to 7 of the institutional reviews was 97%, i.e. nearly all of the HEIs responded. Figure 13 shows how the contact people responded to the question about whether the institutional review contributed to quality enhancement.

Figure 13. The contact people's responses to the question: Does the institutional review contribute to the HEI's quality enhancement?



The institutional reviews were found to be quality enhancers in most cases

The majority of the contact people (nearly 80%) responded that the institutional reviews contributed to the HEI's quality enhancement to a large or very large degree. 17% of the contact people responded that the institutional reviews contributed to the quality enhancement of HEIs to a certain degree, whereas 6% (2 contact people) responded they only did so to a limited degree.

Most of the contact people chose to comment on their responses by answering the question "In what way has the evaluation contributed to the quality enhancement of the HEI?" Most of the responses related to the fact that the evaluation put the focus on quality and gave them the opportunity to work on quality-related issues, not least through the self-evaluation.

The review put the focus on quality. The evaluation also provided useful input for further improvements of the recently reworked quality system.

¹⁰⁹ Round 8 is not included in the data.

When a self-evaluation is produced, information is gathered about all of the university's quality processes, which contributes to a comprehensive picture and the prerequisites for comparing the approaches of different parts of the organisation, and helps to identify the updates to policy documents and guidelines required. They also allowed an increased understanding of the importance of different kinds of quality processes.

The evaluation meant that we took a holistic approach to our quality processes and realised from our self-evaluation that we needed to more clearly coordinate the different parts of our quality approach and improve internal communication, with students and our stakeholders.

With regard to the report, several contact people write that it confirms shortcomings that were already known, but that it also resulted in useful input for further improvements and shows the strengths in HEIs' approaches. It was also mentioned that UKÄ's report emphasised the areas that required remedial work.

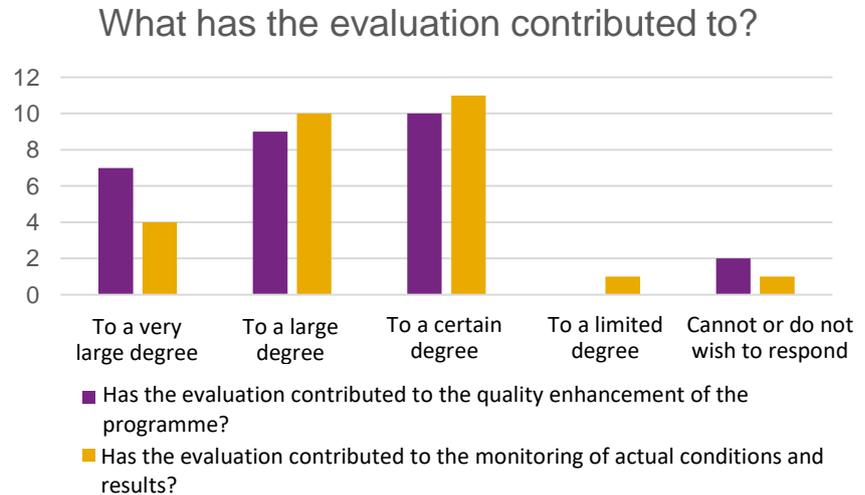
Lastly, one contact person made a strong criticism regarding the usefulness of the report on the HEI itself, and also of the reports on the other HEIs in the same round of reviews. Among other things, the contact person believes that there is little chance of learning lessons from the reports on the other HEIs in the same round of reviews. It is difficult to understand across the board what it is that results in one HEI being given a compliant assessment, and another not being given this assessment in the same assessment area.

Survey responses about evaluations of first-cycle and second-cycle programmes

44 contact people involved in programme evaluations responded to a survey that included a question about whether they believe that the evaluation contributed to the quality enhancement of the programmes in question.¹¹⁰ There is also a question in the surveys about whether they believe that the evaluations contributed to the monitoring of actual conditions and results. The response rate was only 50%.

¹¹⁰ The programme evaluations for which surveys were sent out were evaluations of pre-school, primary school and secondary school teacher training programmes. Surveys were not sent out for evaluations of the following programmes: vocational teacher, psychotherapist and forestry technician training programmes. The surveys regarding the evaluation of specialist nursing programmes were not ready in time for the completion of this report.

Figure 14. The contact people's responses to the questions about whether the evaluation contributed to the quality enhancement of programmes and to the monitoring of actual conditions and results.¹¹¹



A little over half of the respondents believe that the programme evaluations were clearly quality enhancing

Most of the contact people who responded believe that the evaluation contributed to the quality enhancement of the programmes in question to some degree. More than half of the respondents believe this is true to a large or very large extent.

Several of the contact people chose to comment on this question. A selection of the responses are shown below. Some people say that the evaluation contributed to quality enhancement. The internal processes that the evaluation gave rise to are highlighted in the comments, above all for the self-evaluation process.

Several responses mention the importance of the self-evaluation process:

Working on producing the evaluation started an internal process at the HEI that contributed to work on quality and content follow-up.

Areas in need of improvement were identified during the process. Further areas were brought into focus by the reviews' assessments.

The self-evaluation process involved the whole teaching team and gave us more opportunities to analyse and reflect on our programmes together. The form that the process takes of course depends greatly on local decisions, but I believe that we arrived at a process that enhanced our

¹¹¹ The choice of responses is the same, except for the question about whether the evaluation contributed to the monitoring of actual conditions and results, for which the response "not at all" could be chosen. One person gave this response. This response is not presented in the figure.

quality approach and our peer learning. My conclusion is that the evaluation's design creates good opportunities for a quality-enhancing peer-based approach, but that these opportunities must of course be seized by each HEI for this to be realised.

The comments, and particularly the last one, also suggest that, in addition to the self-evaluation, internal processes were also initiated due to the evaluation. There are also some critics, however. The criticisms concern the HEI's own quality approach suffering because of the evaluation and the fact that it created extra work,

while the quality of the programmes' implementation was not enhanced by UKÄ's evaluation. The time spent by employees on self-evaluations and action plans could have had a greater impact within the framework of our internal systematic quality processes.

The contact people were also asked whether the evaluation contributed to the monitoring of actual conditions and results. In other words monitoring that programmes meet the requirements of the applicable laws and ordinances. A little over half of the respondents responded that the evaluation contributed to the monitoring of actual conditions and results to large or very large degree. The answer "not at all" could be given to the question, which one respondent selected (see footnote 102).

A few contact people chose to comment on how the evaluation contributed to the monitoring of actual conditions and results.

As the focus was not on results, but, broadly speaking, only on conditions, it contributes partly, but not fully, to this monitoring.

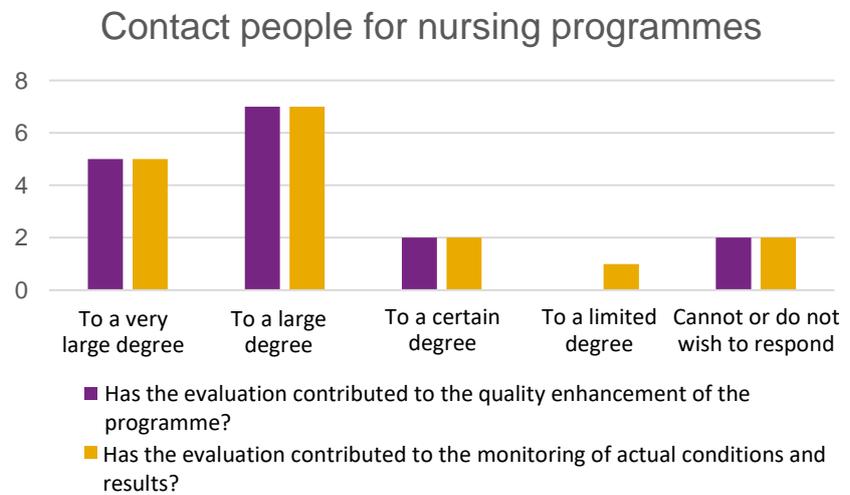
A number of comments seem to suggest that the evaluation certainly contributed to monitoring, but there were also other inputs and they didn't consider the evaluation to be aimed at monitoring.

Survey responses about thematic evaluations of nurse training programmes

23 contact people involved in programmes leading to a nursing degree responded to a survey that included a question about whether they believe that the evaluation contributed to the quality enhancement of the programme in question.¹¹² There is also a question in the surveys about whether the evaluations contributed to the monitoring of the actual conditions and results. The response rate was 68%.

¹¹² No surveys were sent out for the two previous thematic evaluations of sustainable development and widening participation.

Figure 15. The contact people's responses to the questions about whether the evaluation contributed to the quality enhancement of programmes and to the monitoring of actual conditions and results.



The thematic evaluation was found to be quality enhancing in most cases

Most of the contact people believe that the evaluation contributed to the quality enhancement of the programmes in question to a large or very large degree. Most of the contact people also responded that the evaluation contributed to the monitoring of actual conditions and results to a large or very large degree.

Several of the contact people chose to comment on the question regarding quality enhancement. The internal measures that the self-evaluation gave rise to are highlighted in the comments, and the work of the assessors is also mentioned.

It creates added value within the organisation, as a number of people, in the teaching team itself and in management functions, are given an overview of what is happening and the improvement and quality processes being carried out.

It felt as though we were daring to look at ourselves self-critically to find room for improvement as there was no risk of authorisation being withdrawn. It set a high ceiling and made us take a critical look at ourselves. As previously mentioned, I would have welcomed greater opportunities for discussions between HEIs.

The assessors' recommendations and justifications are important inputs for continued quality enhancement.

The contact people were also asked a follow-up question about how the evaluation contributed to the monitoring of actual conditions and results. In other words monitoring that programmes meet the requirements of the

applicable laws and ordinances. The majority responded that the evaluation contributed to the monitoring of actual conditions and results to a large or very large degree.

Feedback conferences

Feedback conferences are an opportunity for mutual feedback on the process undergone by the HEIs, assessors and UKÄ, and are also an opportunity to exchange thoughts and ideas before the HEIs continue with their quality assurance processes. UKÄ invites representatives of the HEIs/programmes reviewed and of the student unions at the HEIs, the chairs of the assessment panels and staff from UKÄ to the conferences.

The feedback conference, which during the cycle often took place digitally, is held a few months after a decision has been made on the review¹¹³, so that the HEI has time to access the reports and to begin work on producing an action plan to address shortcomings highlighted by the assessors, where applicable.

When feedback conferences take place within the framework of institutional reviews, the HEIs' representatives have the opportunity to have a special meeting with the chair of the assessment panel and UKÄ's project group. This is a chance to give each other feedback both on the review process itself and the assessments, and to ask questions.

As the institutional reviews were carried out in rounds in which HEIs with similar characteristics were grouped together, similar challenges were able to be identified. This also applies of course to the programme evaluations. Often one or more external speakers are invited to explore an area of particular interest to the HEIs in the round or the programmes involved in the current evaluation. The HEIs' representatives are also given a chance to hold discussions with each other both in small groups and all together.

Three thematic evaluations were conducted during the cycle. The Minister for Education took part in the feedback conference on widening participation. The chair of the assessment panel presented the results, conclusions and recommendations. A panel debate was also held with vice-chancellors, deputy vice-chancellors and pro-vice-chancellors from five different universities and university colleges. A couple of researchers were invited to give a Scandinavian perspective. The Minister for Education also took part in the feedback conference on sustainable development. The conference was arranged jointly with SUHF with the aim of giving the HEIs the opportunity to draw inspiration and learn from each other. As for the feedback conference on

¹¹³ This doesn't apply to appraisals of degree-awarding powers, however. No feedback conferences were held for third-cycle programme evaluations either.

the thematic evaluation of the nursing training programme, at the time of writing this hadn't yet been held. A webinar was organised a month after the report had been decided on, however. Around 300 people registered for the webinar. The principal chairs and one of the two vice chairs presented the results and then held a discussion based on the questions submitted by the webinar participants.

The feedback conferences were not systematically evaluated. However, the project groups took minutes containing the observations made during the conferences. In round 5 of the institutional reviews an evaluation was carried out in which questions were submitted to the 26 participants after the conference. 11 of these participants responded. In summary, the responses showed that the majority of the respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with the conference as a whole and the individual items on the agenda. The purpose of the conference was described in the invitation as "An opportunity for mutual feedback on the process undergone by the HEIs, assessors and UKÄ, and also an opportunity to exchange thoughts and ideas before they continue their work". Broadly speaking, all the participants responded that they believed that the conference's objectives had been achieved. A few individuals were not as enthusiastic. Everyone was most satisfied with the feedback by project and the cross-group discussions. Many also said that the conference was well organised.

Thematic analyses

Chapter 3 of the ESG on quality assurance organisations' activities includes a standard, 3.4, on thematic analyses. According to the standard, the organisations should regularly publish analyses of what has emerged during reviews and might be of importance beyond the specific reviews. The conclusions may contribute thoughts on the improvement of HEIs' activities and quality assurance strategies.

This section briefly presents some of the thematic analyses that UKÄ carried out during the cycle.

Perspectives

The perspectives, i.e. gender equality, the student and doctoral student perspective, and working life and collaboration (or only collaboration) were either turned into assessment areas or integrated into assessment criteria after the pilots. For the institutional reviews, they were turned into assessment areas after the pilot. For the institutional reviews of research, the student and doctoral student perspective was already integrated in other assessment areas in the pilot, and after the pilot all the "perspectives" were integrated into the Prerequisites assessment area. There were also assessment areas after the pilot for the programme evaluations, but gender equality was integrated as an assessment criterion in the Design, teaching/learning and outcomes assessment area.

In several self-initiated analyses, UKÄ investigated how these perspectives and assessment areas were dealt with in reviews during the cycle. How gender equality is reflected in UKÄ's reviews was analysed in both institutional reviews and programme evaluations at third-cycle level¹¹⁴. The student perspective was reviewed overall in *En kartläggning av hur studentfrågor kommer till uttryck i UKÄ:s granskningar*¹¹⁵. The analysis covers institutional reviews and programme evaluations during 2017–2020.

An analysis of the working life perspective is presented in the report *Arbetsliv och samverkan. En kartläggning av hur arbetsliv och samverkan kommer till uttryck i UKÄ:s granskningar*¹¹⁶. This shows that the assessors involved in both institutional reviews and programme evaluations identify structures for collaboration with employers and the labour market and their representatives and for collaboration in the form of activities and transfers of knowledge. At the same time, it is noted that the relationship between institutional reviews and programme evaluations must be clarified ahead of future reviews to avoid unnecessary overlaps.

The mapping of the student perspective shows that this perspective fulfils an enhancement function in UKÄ's reviews, but that there is reason for UKÄ to review how the different reviews supplement each other, including from a legal viewpoint. Both the institutional reviews and the programme evaluations highlight that the formal rights for student influence are usually in place, but there is room for improvement when it comes to student representation and student engagement. The response rate for course and programme evaluations is much too low to offer a good basis for quality enhancement.

In the report on gender equality in third-cycle programmes it is mentioned that UKÄ already noted a need to develop the substance of the assessment criteria back in 2018. The guidelines were therefore revised in 2018. However, a need for further analyses was indicated, as a significant variation was noted in the assessments and in what was being assessed. For gender equality in the institutional reviews (programmes), the analyses show that there are major differences in the amount of detail in which programme-related activities and the systematisation within them are described. The report also states that, in many cases, the assessment panels interpret gender equality more broadly than is specified in the assessment criterion, judging from their reports.

¹¹⁴ The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Kartläggning av hur bedömning av perspektivet jämställdhet kommer till uttryck UKÄ:s lärosätessgranskningar avseende utbildning*. Memo, Ref. No 411-00459-20, and *Bedömning av jämställdhet i forskarutbildningar. En analys av metod och resultat i UKÄ:s utvärderingar*. Report 2020:04.

¹¹⁵ The Swedish Higher Education Authority, Report 2021:3.

¹¹⁶ The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Arbetsliv och samverkan. En kartläggning av hur arbetsliv och samverkan kommer till uttryck i UKÄ:s granskningar*. Report 2017:7.

The gender equality and student influence perspectives were notably difficult to assess in the appraisals of degree-awarding powers. For the student perspective, and to a certain degree the gender equality perspective, one problem is that the programmes have not yet started when the applications are submitted. This makes it difficult to determine how the perspectives are integrated within programmes in practice, through student interviews, for example.

Internal analyses of certain assessment criteria

During the cycle, some self-initiated internal analyses also investigated how specific assessment criteria were dealt with in the reviews conducted¹¹⁷. For instance, assessments of assessment criterion 2.3 *The HEI systematically works to create good conditions for freedom of research* were analysed after the institutional reviews of research in round 8. The analysis shows that the assessments often present important factors for freedom of research¹¹⁸, with a focus on freedom for researchers to choose research questions themselves. These factors seems to either promote freedom of research or to constitute potential problems in the form of excess control by the HEI or on the part of external funding providers. It should be pointed out that the potential problems that the assessment panels identify are mostly described as risks rather than shortcomings actually observed in systematic work to promote freedom of research. Given the absence of actual evidence of restrictions on freedom of research, the assessment panels in question seem to have been inclined to give a positive rather than a negative assessment despite the stated risks.

Assessment criterion 2.2 *The HEI systematically works to create good conditions for the development and renewal of research and research environments* was also analysed. For this assessment criterion too, important factors were identified as criteria for assessment¹¹⁹ but, contrary to the previous assessment criterion, there are relatively large differences between the reasoning in the reports and the reasons for the assessments. A general observation made in the analysis is that the assessment panels appear to have interpreted what the assessment criterion regarding the development and renewal of research refers to in two different ways.

In one of these interpretations, the development and renewal of research appears to be equated with the renewal, maintaining and reinforcing of the lines of research that already exist at the HEI. In the other

¹¹⁷ The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Om bedömningarna avseende förutsättningar för forskningens utveckling och förnyelse i lärosättesgranskningarnas omgång 8* and *Om bedömningarna avseende förutsättningar för forskningens utveckling och förnyelse i lärosättesgranskningarnas omgång 8*. Internal memo produced in February-March 2023.

¹¹⁸ The analysis puts these factors in the categories peer influence, allocation of resources model, external funding and research grants.

¹¹⁹ The analysis puts these factors in the categories external research resources, internal allocation of research, recruitment and employee research time.

interpretation, the development and renewal of research appears to be equated more with conditions for innovative research projects, cross-disciplinary projects and ground-breaking research. The difference in the assessment panels' interpretations of what the development and renewal of research essentially means is significant as it most probably affected the outcomes for this assessment criterion.

The analyses indicate that there are partial overlaps between assessment criteria 2.2 and 2.3 in some of the reports, but not in others. This applies, for example, to the reasoning for 2.3 on conditions allowing researchers to choose research questions themselves, freedom of research and the possibility for researchers to pursue innovative research projects and new lines of research and the development and renewal of research.

Both of the analyses note that there is relatively little in the assessments concerning follow-up for these assessment criteria. The analyses note that the focus for the assessments seems to have been put on quality with regard to the prerequisites for freedom of research and research development and renewal, rather than on the HEIs' systematic work to safeguard, develop and maintain an effective environment for freedom of research and research development and renewal.

The analyses point, however, to a certain methodological problem with the assessment criteria's wording. The relationship between the assessment criteria may need to be clarified, to avoid unnecessary overlaps ahead of future reviews.

Appraisals of degree-awarding powers at third-cycle level in 2010–2020

In one analysis¹²⁰, the fields in which university colleges and independent higher education providers were granted authorisation to offer third-cycle programmes were presented. The results showed that, at a global level, authorisations are evenly distributed between engineering, natural sciences, social sciences and medicine and health sciences. There are somewhat fewer authorisations for fields of study in the humanities and the arts, and none at all in agricultural sciences and veterinary medicine. Although the fields of study can be put into current categories, the fields' names and content often show evidence of profiling, with significant applied research aspects. A number of the authorised fields of study extend over more than one subject area (engineering, natural sciences, etc.) and may therefore be described as cross-disciplinary fields.

The report also reviews the third-cycle programme subjects (third-cycle programmes) that the HEIs have chosen to offer within the framework of their authorisations. For the fields of study that may be classified as

¹²⁰ The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Forskarutbildning vid högskolorna. En fråga om profilering*. Report 2021:14.

natural science-related, computer and information science are the third-cycle programme subjects that predominate. In the engineering category, electronic engineering and electronics, mechanical engineering, environmental engineering and materials engineering are common. In medicine and health sciences, HEIs have opted for health sciences and, within this field, nursing science and caregiving are the most common subjects. In social sciences, media and communication science is the most common subject. One HEI (Södertörn university college) has a number of humanities and arts subjects. At the other three HEIs that offer fields of study in humanities and the arts, the subjects are in the fine arts, design and religion.

A survey was sent out with questions about the fields' significance for the HEIs, and the results presented in the report. The survey responses show that all the HEIs believe that having degree-awarding powers has contributed to their profiling. In tangible terms, it was found that these powers affected strategic decisions, funding and the recruitment of qualified staff, and increased collaboration and the number of publications.

A smaller number of third-cycle programmes within the framework for field-of-study authorisations were evaluated. So far, the outcomes are similar to the outcomes for other third-cycle programmes evaluated by UKÄ.

Revision of the guidelines¹²¹

During the cycle, the guidelines has undergone some revisions, in addition to the revisions made directly after the respective pilot reviews. The revisions were aimed at ensuring greater efficiency, for example by grouping together assessment criteria with related content. In some cases, adaptations were also made that meant deviating from the applicable guidelines for some programme evaluations.

Institutional reviews of programmes

In addition to the revision of the guidelines after the pilot, which we have already presented, a further revision was completed after the first two rounds of reviews. The third¹²² and fourth¹²³ assessment criteria in the Prerequisites assessment area were merged into one assessment criterion: *2.3 The HEI ensures that infrastructure, student support and learning resources are fit for purpose for students' and doctoral students' learning and are used in an effective way.* This applied during rounds

¹²¹ The guidelines on follow-ups were also updated both for first-cycle and second-cycle programmes and for institutional reviews of programmes.

¹²² The HEI ensures that the infrastructure and student support are appropriate for the learning process of students and doctoral students.

¹²³ The HEI ensures that there are sufficient learning resources and that they are used in an effective way.

3–8. The fifth assessment criterion in the Design, teaching/learning and outcomes assessment area was moved, while retaining the same wording, to the Prerequisites assessment area. Assessment criterion 2.4 *The HEI ensures, through procedures and processes, that students and doctoral students are given the right conditions to enable them to complete the programme within the planned period of study* in the guidelines applied during rounds 3–8.

Institutional reviews of research

The revision of the guidelines carried out after the pilot has already been presented in the report in the chapter named Outcomes and experiences from the 2017–2022 quality assurance system. Only one periodic round of reviews was conducted during the cycle, which means that no further revisions were required.

Programme evaluations

First-cycle and second-cycle programmes

There were no revisions of the guidelines during the current cycle other than the changes made after the pilot evaluation. Some deviations from the guidelines were decided on for some programme evaluations, however. For example, independent student projects were excluded as a basis for assessment for programme evaluations relating to vocational teaching qualifications (where no independent projects are included in the assessment basis for qualifications) and specialist nursing qualifications (where the independent projects vary in scope depending on the programme, which would make assessments of both the projects themselves and the programmes more difficult). Programme and course plans were also a part of the assessment basis for evaluations of specialist nursing programmes. A reason for this was that independent projects were excluded as an assessment basis and programme and course plans taken together give a good overview of programmes as a whole. In addition, qualitative targets were chosen from two fields of knowledge in the evaluation of vocational teaching qualifications.

Another adaptation made to the evaluation of specialist nursing qualifications was that not all the programmes in the three specialisations were reviewed. Only a maximum of two specialisations were reviewed for the same HEI. If a HEI had all three specialisations, they were exempted from the district nursing evaluation. The aim was to reduce the workload for the HEIs.

Third-cycle level¹²⁴

There was a major revision of the guidelines after the pilot study in 2016 (see the previous chapter) and a raft of more minor revisions were made in 2018. The changes made in 2018 were of different kinds. The concepts “aspect area” and “aspect” were replaced by assessment area and assessment criterion.

The assessment area Gender equality, which was previously its own assessment area, became one of several assessment criteria in the assessment area Design, teaching/learning and outcomes. The assessment criterion Follow-up, actions and feedback was included in all the aspects, before instead becoming an assessment criterion within Design, teaching/learning and outcomes. Some terminological changes were also made to emphasise certain parts of the assessment criteria. Furthermore, a change was made to the publication list requirements.

From 2018, self-evaluations also had to begin with a short background description whose purpose was to set the programme in a broader context. The background description had to reflect any background factors that it was important for the assessment panel to know, and that did not directly relate to the assessment criteria. This was linked to the elimination of the Third-cycle programme subject aspect.

Before 2018, publication lists for the last five years were requested. Starting from 2018, the requirement became to list a maximum of ten publications for the people who contributed to the third-cycle programme, including doctoral students.

Appraisals of degree-awarding powers

Revision in 2018

The revision entailed changing the guidelines to align it with the guidelines for other components. This means that what were previously known as aspect areas and aspects were replaced with assessment areas and assessment criteria. Moreover, gender equality was moved to the assessment area Design, teaching/learning and outcomes.

Collaboration on degree-awarding powers – a new wording in the guidelines in 2021

In the report *En långsiktig, samordnad och dialogbaserad styrning av högskolan* (SOU 2019:6), the investigator found that cooperation by HEIs to share programme workloads needs to be developed. The report

¹²⁴ The description is based on the internal memo *Huvudsakliga förändringar som gjorts i vägledningarna*, 26/01/2018 produced for UKÄ's quality assurance system reference groups and the internal memo *Föreslagna förändringar av utvärderingsmetoden för utvärdering av utbildningar på forskarnivå*, 08/08/2017.

*Ansökan om examenstillstånd. Om samarbeten*¹²⁵ highlights the conditions under which UKÄ is able to approve applications for degree-awarding powers that are based on resource-related cooperation agreements entered into by HEIs.

The report's concluding section contains a proposal for changes to UKÄ's existing guidelines. The changes were introduced in 2021, shortly after the report's publication. They entail the adding of a brief passage on cooperation to the general guidelines for appraisals of degree-awarding powers.

Summary

This chapter shows that UKÄ carries out a lot of continuous follow-up and improvement activities, including feedback conferences, surveys and thematic analyses, and other follow-up work both with external stakeholders and internally. This follow-up work has, among other things, resulted in the guidelines being revised to make them more fit for purpose, for example by merging assessment criteria whose content is related. In some cases, adaptations were also made that meant deviating from the applicable guidelines for some programme evaluations.

Feedback conferences have offered an opportunity for mutual feedback on the process undergone by the HEIs, assessors and UKÄ, and also an opportunity to exchange thoughts and ideas before the HEIs continue with their quality assurance processes. The feedback that UKÄ received was positive and the perception was that the conferences fulfilled their function. They were not systematically evaluated, however.

The surveys have shown that the HEIs' contact people find the reviews to be quality enhancing. For the institutional reviews, most (around 80%) responded that they think this to a large or very large degree. It may be noted, however, that the response rate differs for the various components, as does the extent to which the contact people agree. The reviews' purpose may play a role here.

Several thematic evaluations were conducted during the cycle. The tension between equivalence and a peer review approach was noted in some of them. This is an issue that has also sometimes arisen in feedback conferences and surveys. How much room might be allowed for the interpretation of assessment criteria may be an issue for deeper discussion, preferably in consultation with the sector.

¹²⁵ The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Ansökan om examenstillstånd. Om samarbeten*. Report 2021:13.

External reviews and international collaboration

The system is quality enhancing according to external evaluations

According to UKÄ's public service agreement, an external evaluation of the quality assurance system must be carried out three years after the system's introduction. The assignment of conducting the external evaluation was given to Faugert & Co Utvärdering, which performed the evaluation during the period from October 2019 to December 2020¹²⁶. The purpose of the evaluation was partly to find out the effects of the quality assurance system, and partly to give recommendations to UKÄ for how the quality assurance system might be further developed. The data collected consisted of documentation studies, web surveys, exploratory interviews and in-depth interviews, international case studies and in-depth studies that included physical and digital site visits.

According to the evaluation, the national quality assurance system is quality enhancing and effective. Other positive aspects are that the quality assurance system has been developed in consultation with the sector and other stakeholders with an awareness of the higher education system, and that HEIs have become more focused on quality issues. It emerged that HEIs' staff have become more aware of quality issues as a result of the HEIs being made responsible for their own quality processes. That the student and doctoral student perspective and working life perspective are incorporated in the system is a major advantage of the current system for many.

There are also criticisms of the system, however, which is seen as onerous. Not least, the work on self-evaluations takes time. The reviews are considered to be onerous due to the number of evaluations carried out and how they are organised time-wise with regard to each other. Employer and labour market representatives and representatives of research and innovation organisations highlight the fact that HEIs need to be evaluated to ensure the continued high quality of their activities. However, there is room for improvement in opportunities for students and doctoral students to take part in evaluations, and when it comes to how the working life perspective is incorporated in the system.

With regard to the various components, it appears that institutional reviews are the component that is found to be the most effective and that

¹²⁶ Faugert & Co Utvärdering, *Utvärdering av nationellt system för kvalitetssäkring av högre utbildning. Analys av pågående cykel 2017–2022*. Technopolis group 2020.

has contributed to the most quality enhancing effects for HEIs. The appraisals of degree-awarding powers are also considered to have a self-evident place in the system. The lack of feedback in reports on appraisals of degree-awarding powers is mentioned. The application process can also sometimes create a catch 22 situation for HEIs, as the resources earmarked for the intended programme must already be declared at the time of the application procedure.

There are differences of opinion regarding the effectiveness of programme evaluations. The majority of the HEIs state that this component should be maintained, but its format needs to be reviewed and made simpler, although opinions differ for the thematic evaluations. A wish is expressed for more collective learning and sharing of best practice instead, for the function reviewed. It also seems that there are concerns that the thematic evaluations may lead to political control, which threatens to undermine the independence of HEIs.

UKÄ's renewed full membership of ENQA

ENQA, previously known as the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, was founded in 2000 as a stakeholder organisation for quality assurance organisations in the European higher education area. Its purpose was to promote European cooperation in the quality assurance of higher education. In 2004, the organisation changed its name to the *European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education* with the aim of contributing to the maintaining and development of higher education in Europe, and to the development of quality assurance in all the countries that are parties to the Bologna Process. To become ENQA members, quality assurance organisations must show that they comply with the ESG, i.e. the European quality assurance standards in the European higher education area.

Through a procedure involving a peer assessment and self-evaluation, an assessment panel of international experts assessed how well UKÄ and the national quality system complies with the ESG. When conducting their review, the assessors analysed extensive data in the form of UKÄ's self-evaluation report and other documentation that reflects UKÄ's activities. A digital site visit was completed during the autumn with interviews of a large number of UKÄ's stakeholders and employees.

ENQA's review showed that UKÄ very much complies with the ESG standards, and particularly highlighted UKÄ's close dialogue with HEIs, and the important role that students and employer and labour market representatives play in the Swedish quality assurance system. At the same time, ENQA noted the challenges faced given that the system is complex and may be perceived as being onerous for HEIs. UKÄ does not yet have a complaint management procedure in place. There is also

no follow-up of programmes for which degree-awarding powers have been granted. In December 2020, ENQA's board decided on renewed membership for UKÄ. ENQA recommended, however, that UKÄ also continue to ensure that the authority has a mandate to independently design external quality assurance methods. It was also recommended that UKÄ take steps to reduce the workload involved in evaluations by the authority for HEIs. In this work, UKÄ should take into account the extent to which the various evaluations may be integrated or supplement each other. UKÄ also urgently needs to produce a predefined follow-up mechanism for programmes that are given a positive assessment in appraisals of degree-awarding powers, as a way of helping to ensure that the programmes' high quality is maintained. UKÄ should also more clearly define follow-up procedures for HEIs and programmes that are given a positive assessment in institutional reviews and programme evaluations.¹²⁷

UKÄ is more active internationally

UKÄ increased its participation in international cooperation in the quality assurance of higher education during the cycle. In addition to already established collaboration networks, such as the annual meetings of the Nordic NOQA network¹²⁸ (*Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education*), and cooperation within the ECA¹²⁹ (*European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education*), UKÄ took part in several European projects. Within the *Bologna Follow-Up Group* (BFUG), whose task is to work to introduce the Bologna Process, conferences and work meetings were held that UKÄ took part in. To enable the transfer of knowledge between countries and organisations exchanges of staff have been arranged, which UKÄ participated in both by hosting staff from NVAO (*Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders*) in Belgium and visiting this organisation. The exchange lasted for around a week. More exchanges are planned for autumn 2023.

Within the framework of BFUG's work, UKÄ took part in a pilot study – EUNiQ – aimed at producing a model for the quality assurance of European universities. The EU-financed study was coordinated by NVAO between May 2019 and May 2021. Four European universities were evaluated and the project included eight quality assurance

¹²⁷ For the record, UKÄ carried out some follow-ups of authorisations granted in the form of programme evaluations. The programmes to be evaluated were chosen, however, based on considerations other than whether the programmes underwent appraisals of degree-awarding powers. This meant that it was more of a coincidence if an authorisation was reviewed by means of programme evaluations. With regard to third-cycle authorisations, the reviews of third-cycle programme evaluations completed up to 2020 show that 17 programmes covered by the third-cycle authorisations granted (out of a total of 36) were evaluated during the 2016–2020 period.

¹²⁸ NOQA is a forum for the dissemination of information, exchanging of experiences and pursuit of projects of common interest. NOQA was established by the five Nordic countries and their respective national organisations active in the evaluation and quality assurance of higher education.

¹²⁹ UKÄ has contributed, for instance, through an investigator from UKÄ joining ECA's board.

organisations (of which one was UKÄ), six ministries and the European stakeholder organisations EUA, ESU and ENQA. The evaluation method was inspired by the *European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes*¹³⁰. Otherwise the process resembled the process we are familiar with from our own evaluations, with peer reviews conducted by assessment panels, self-evaluations, site visits and assessment reports.

During 2021–2022, a UKÄ employee participated in the European project MICROBOL. The purpose of this project was to investigate how the accepted Bologna tools (*Bologna key commitments: Quality assurance, Recognition, Qualifications framework & ECTS*) might work for micro-credentials¹³¹. In 2021–2023, we have also been active in ENQA’s *Working group on quality assurance of micro-credentials*. The aim of this working group is to support quality assurance organisations and HEIs with the management of the quality assurance of micro-credentials. The focus is on how well adapted the ESG are to the quality assurance of micro-credentials, and on whether the ESG need to be supplemented in some way. UKÄ is also a participant in the BFUG, having a representative in a working group on the quality assurance of micro-credentials, and in the working group *Quality Assurance for European Universities*, which is part of the IMINQA (*Implementation and Innovation in Quality Assurance through Peer Learning*) project.

Thanks to our membership of ENQA and the external review that preceded it, in 2021 UKÄ was also able to join EQAR (*European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education*), the official European register for quality assurance bodies. Together with ENQA membership, this is proof that UKÄ meets the European quality assurance standards set out in the ESG. In autumn 2022, UKÄ also hosted ENQA’s general meeting, which took place in Stockholm.

ENQA and EQAR membership also gives Sweden and UKÄ the opportunity to influence developments in the European higher education area. UKÄ’s readiness to meet HEIs’ need for effective quality assurance across borders is also increasing. An important task for UKÄ in this respect is to identify national legal and administrative obstacles to transnational quality assurance and to work to overcome them. EQAR is

¹³⁰ *The European Approach* was adopted in 2015 by the ministries for higher education within the European higher education area. The aim was to facilitate the quality assurance of international programmes involving at least two countries (<https://www.eqar.eu/kb/joint-programmes/background/> downloaded on 23/01/2023).

¹³¹ This term was added to the Swedish Council for Higher Education’s Swedish/English higher education glossary a few years ago with the following, quite general definition: “Documented evidence that confirms what a person has learned from a programme considered to be more limited in scope according to an assessment made based on transparent standards and requirements”. The glossary also provides the following explanatory note: “The evidence consists of supporting documents containing information about the holder’s name, the learning outcomes achieved, the assessment method, the awarding body and, where applicable, the level in the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and number of credit points. Micro-credentials may consist of modules within longer programmes and be included in more comprehensive credentials or qualifications. Micro-credentials are a tool to facilitate the documenting of individuals’ life-long learning.”

working to ensure that HEIs will not need to be reviewed twice over, but through a unified process instead.

In November 2022, UKÄ signed the international *Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment*, whose purpose is to reform the assessment of research and research credentials. The agreement sets out a common pathway for the development of criteria and processes for the reviewing of research and research credentials. In January 2023, the agency also became a member of CoARA (*Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment*). The coalition is designed to act as a platform for work related to the *Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment*. UKÄ will also lead a working group on the quality assurance of research, alongside the French quality assurance organisation HCERES (*High Council for the Evaluation of Research and Higher Education*).

Summary

UKÄ underwent two external reviews during the cycle. According to UKÄ's public service agreement, an external evaluation of the quality assurance must be carried out three years after the system has been introduced. The assignment of conducting the external evaluation was given to Faugert & Co Utvärdering, which performed the evaluation during the period from October 2019 to December 2020¹³². The purpose of the evaluation was partly to find out the effects of the quality assurance system, and partly to give recommendations to UKÄ for how the quality assurance system might be further developed. The review showed briefly that the system was quality enhancing, but was too resource intensive for the HEIs, UKÄ and the assessors.

UKÄ submitted an application for membership of ENQA during the cycle and was therefore evaluated. The results showed that the national quality assurance system complies with the ESG, and UKÄ was able to become a full member of ENQA again. On the basis of its ENQA membership, UKÄ is now also a member of the EQAR register for organisations that comply with the ESG.

During the cycle, UKÄ significantly increased its international activities. ENQA and EQAR membership also gives Sweden and UKÄ more of an opportunity to influence developments in the European higher education area. In January 2023, the agency also became a member of CoARA (*Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment*). UKÄ's readiness to meet HEIs' need for effective quality assurance across borders is also increasing. An important task for UKÄ in this respect is to identify national legal and administrative obstacles to transnational quality assurance and to work on overcoming them.

¹³² Faugert & Co Utvärdering, 2020. *Utvärdering av nationellt system för kvalitetssäkring av högre utbildning. Analys av pågående cykel 2017–2022*, Technopolis group 2020.

A system under development

This chapter presents the bases for the continued development work of making changes to the method used in UKÄ's national quality assurance system. We also summarise the system's strengths and areas in need of improvement and conclude with some reflections ahead of future reviews¹³³.

Strengths and areas in need of improvement

When UKÄ's current cycle of reviews ends it might be said that the system has generally fulfilled its purpose. It has reviewed the activities of HEIs and also seemed to be quality enhancing. Thanks to this system, Sweden, through UKÄ, has qualified again for full membership of ENQA. We have also seen UKÄ's international collaboration increase during the cycle¹³⁴.

To ensure the national quality assurance system's effectiveness, it has been followed up, developed and evaluated both continuously during the cycle, and more globally by external assessors. The continuous follow-up and improvement has involved receiving feedback from the HEIs and the assessors who took part in the reviews, not least through surveys sent out after every review. UKÄ has also maintained a continuous dialogue with stakeholders through its reference groups, whose members include student representatives and employer and labour market representatives in addition to representatives from HEIs. The process has also been followed up internally, however, during and after every round of reviews. Several thematic analyses have also been conducted. In addition, starting from 2019, a feedback report has been produced for the government each year, in accordance with the authority's government instructions, containing information about the reviews conducted during the current year, what emerged from them and how the system contributed to the quality enhancement of the HEIs.

That the quality assurance system would undergo an external evaluation was already stated in the *Regleringsbrev för budgetåret 2016 avseende*

¹³³ A summary that also includes the outcomes of the reviews, including the HEIs' strengths and areas in need of improvement, is provided before the introduction to the report.

¹³⁴ The increased international collaboration has also resulted in organisational changes at UKÄ. In November 2022, the Department of Quality Assurance gained another unit, tasked with coordination and internationalisation.

*Universitetskanslersämbetet*¹³⁵. The evaluation was carried out by Faugert & Co Utvärdering. Shortly afterwards, ENQA also evaluated UKÄ and the quality assurance system, with the result that UKÄ once again became a full member.

The national quality assurance system's areas in need of improvement

Although the system fulfilled its purpose, of reviewing and improving, some criticisms have emerged from the external follow-ups and evaluations carried out. The system has been described as too resource intensive for HEIs, assessors and UKÄ, and it has also been pointed out that it overlaps with HEIs' quality processes. There are also overlaps between the system's four different components, above all between programme evaluations and institutional reviews. Within the individual components too, the substance of several assessment criteria is repeated in several assessment areas, which means that some of the assessment criteria were seen to be difficult to interpret. In internal analyses it was noted that what was focused on during assessments differed somewhat depending on the report, perhaps because the people involved were unsure and interpreted the substance of the assessment criteria differently.

Changes to the method ahead of future reviews

After the cycle has ended it will be time for new reviews. Contrary to previous cycles, the consensus is that a new system should not be defined. There are several reasons for this. A decisive reason is that the national quality assurance system is well aligned with the current ESG and ENQA's requirements. HEIs have also worked extensively, and are continuing to work, on taking primary responsibility for programme evaluations and their own quality processes, including the quality assurance of research. This work should be given the time needed for it to be implemented and developed. Finally, excessively large changes would risk increasing the evaluation fatigue that is often mentioned and take resources away from HEIs' core activities.

UKÄ began development work on this basis in 2021. The follow-ups and external reviews referred to above, along with a situational analysis and focus group interviews with HEI representatives, were the starting point for this work. In this concluding chapter, we briefly present the positions that lie behind the method development process.

¹³⁵ U2016/03128/UH.

Preliminary study ahead of method development

In preparation for the method development process, UKÄ set out guiding principles for method development. These are documented in the report *Förstudien inför utveckling av det nationella kvalitetssäkringssystemet*¹³⁶. According to these principles, there should be a particular focus on making reviews more

- refined and targeted
- flexible and situation specific
- resource efficient and complementary.

It should be made easier for people to find their way through the assessment criteria and different review activities, and only what is intended and what needs to be reviewed should be reviewed to be of use to HEIs' development. The reviews should be adapted to the object to be reviewed and HEIs' different profiles and needs. UKÄ's, HEIs' and assessors' resources should be used effectively, not least to reduce the workload. UKÄ's overall knowledge of and expertise in reviews, supervision, statistics, analyses and methods should be used in a complementary way in the development of review activities.

The preliminary study also includes a list of examples of areas that should be taken into account in the method development process, such as:

- an increased need for innovative, digital methods and approaches in UKÄ's reviews
- the need to develop methods that take into account increased cooperation between HEIs both nationally and internationally
- the need to develop methods for reviewing programme quality and quality assurance regardless of whether the course is provided remotely or otherwise
- the need to develop methods for evaluating programmes that do not need to lead to qualifications but are a part of life-long learning, such as micro-credentials and contracted programmes.

Using the preliminary study as a starting point, the method development process led to a memo¹³⁷ containing the positions taken ahead of the continued development work. The following overall positions are stated:

1. Reducing the number of assessment areas and assessment criteria as well as the level of detail

¹³⁶ The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Förstudie inför utveckling av det nationella kvalitetssäkringssystemet*. Memo, Ref. No 412- 00067-21.

¹³⁷ The memo, dated 10/03/2022, was produced by the method development steering group and was the basis for a meeting of the steering group.

2. Not all the ESG standards should be reviewed in each individual review.
3. A trust-based approach leads to changes in working methods.
4. Gender equality to be dealt with mainly as a thematic evaluation.

Concluding reflections – quality-enhancing reviews are a joint responsibility

In this concluding chapter we discussed how UKÄ intends to meet the development needs that became clear from continuous follow-up and development measures, and from the external reviews conducted by the national quality assurance system. The reviews must become more targeted, flexible and less onerous for HEIs, assessors and UKÄ.

We began this report with a history of our previous national quality assurance systems for higher education. Sweden was a front runner when it came to both national quality assurance and getting involved in quality assurance for higher education in Europe. The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, which was one of the driving forces behind the formation of ENQA, became a full member of the organisation back in 2005. The Swedish quality reviews attracted interest, but after the first rounds of institutional reviews it was noted that there was no clear link between quality processes and the quality of institutions' activities.

A major change that took place during the cycle was UKÄ's changed government instructions, which, from 2017, included the quality assurance not only of programmes but of universities' and university colleges' *activities*. Reviews of the quality assurance of research, which are still a relatively new thing in Europe, are now a component part of institutional reviews. UKÄ will therefore lead a working group on the reviewing of the quality assurance of research, together with a French quality assurance organisation.

A key aim of the now ended cycle pursued through the introduction of institutional reviews was to again clarify the fact that HEIs have primary responsibility for ensuring the quality of their programmes and that UKÄ's role is to check that HEIs are assuming their responsibilities. So how far have we come in this regard?

External follow-ups and evaluations have shown that the national quality assurance system in its current form is quality enhancing, which can probably be taken as proof of a clear link between quality processes and the quality of institutions' activities. Is the system focused and targeted *enough* though? In some cases we have seen that HEIs have been given an approved assessment of their quality assurance processes but some of their programmes have been given the assessment *under review*. Similarly, HEIs that have received an approved assessment for their

quality assurance processes or the establishment of programmes assessment criterion have also had applications for degree-awarding powers rejected. As stated earlier in the report, the shortcomings most commonly found in UKÄ's programme evaluations and appraisals of degree-awarding powers concern the ensuring of the achievement of qualitative targets and the number of teachers with relevant expertise. This might suggest that UKÄ's institutional reviews need to become more targeted, e.g. with regard to whether the processes for the establishment of programmes, competency planning and continuous follow-ups and periodic reviews are fit for purpose and work in practice. When it comes to the latter processes, our summary review shows that many HEIs fall short in institutional reviews with respect to follow-ups and periodic reviews, which might partly explain the shortcomings shown in UKÄ's programme evaluations. We also discuss this in the report. Another explanation for this outcome is that the majority of the HEIs were in the process of developing their quality systems and they therefore hadn't been sufficiently tested to ensure the necessary systematisation.

However, an important part of the outgoing cycle is emphasising that the HEIs themselves have primary responsibility for quality in their activities. For HEIs to fully assume their responsibilities, they need to ensure that the continuous follow-ups work and carry out periodic reviews of all of their programmes, and do this in a focused and targeted way so that the students' achievement of the objectives set is ensured. Similarly, a focused approach is needed in the processes used by HEIs to ensure that new programmes maintain a high level of quality. Note that only a small percentage of the programmes introduced are appraised by UKÄ.

It would also be useful to map the extent to which reviews of degree projects are included in HEIs' programme evaluations. A criticism made of previous quality assurance systems was that the reviews focus on programme prerequisites and processes rather than on results. What is the situation with regard to this issue today?

Lastly, it can also be worth looking ahead when it comes to outreach activities. Given the increased internationalisation taking place in Swedish HEIs, no less than 13 Swedish HEIs being included in the European Universities initiative, the preliminary study also mentions this as an area that UKÄ needs to monitor. A new section in the Higher Education Act, and the fact that internationalisation is a priority area for the authority in 2023, has resulted in work being initiated to investigate how internationalisation may be included in reviews conducted as part of future quality assurance processes. UKÄ will also investigate whether there are legal obstacles to transnational quality assurance in Sweden, which is a topical issue for quality assurance organisations and a

growing number of HEIs¹³⁸.

¹³⁸The work is taking place in cooperation with the Swedish Council for Higher Education, which has been tasked by the government with mapping and analysing opportunities for Swedish universities and university colleges to take part in the European Universities initiative.

Further reading about the quality assurance system

A general overview of the quality assurance system

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The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Tematisk utvärdering av utbildning som leder till sjuksköterskeexamen*. 2022, Ref. No 411-00253-21.

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The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Små forskarutbildningsmiljöer. Utmaningar och framgångsfaktorer*. 2019 Report 17.

The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Granskning för utveckling, utvärdering av 95 utbildningar på forskarnivå 2017–2018*. Report 2019:1.

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The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *För ökad genomströmning. Sammanställning av lärosätenas insatser vid förskollära- och grundlärautbildningar*. Report 2020:17.

The Swedish Higher Education Authority, *Lärarytelse: Kvalitet, utmaningar och strategier 2016–2022*. Report 2023:9.

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