

# A national picture – follow-up of educational development efforts

Summary of our work and UKÄ's assessments and proposals



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# What have we seen?

There are currently no national regulations or strategies to fall back on. Educational development in higher education is not included in the Swedish Higher Education Act, the higher education institutions (HEIs) are not tasked with this assignment and it is not included in teachers' job descriptions. But the Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ) regards such development work as an important part of the quality assurance procedures of HEIs and a joint issue for the HEI staff and students.

Since the area is unregulated, a great responsibility rests on the management of HEIs to establish high standards and to join teachers, educational developers and students in creating an organisation and an activity based on prevailing conditions and needs.

## **Lack of a national coordinating function**

Through our survey, we have seen that the HEIs approach educational development in different ways so, as might be expected, the picture is scattered at the HEI level. However, we could clearly see that the managements' approach and attitude play a major role in how work on educational development is perceived in other parts of the organisation. To succeed in this task, it seems necessary to have a working interaction among all the parties involved: management, teachers, educational developers and students.

We have also seen that the HEIs find interesting local solutions to problems. This includes solutions that could possibly work elsewhere if there were a national coordinating function that could plan, coordinate and systematise a continuous exchange of information and experience. This would enable benefiting from the efforts of others and enhance the impact of local development efforts, turning them into advances for the entire sector. The sector's joint development efforts could become even more effective if there were national strategies on which to rely. Sweden currently lacks both a common national strategy for educational development in higher education and for digitisation of higher education and research. We also lack a national coordinating function that can take a holistic approach and promote the development of teaching and learning in higher education.

Looking back over the past 10–15 years and studying the plethora of follow-ups, evaluations and testaments, we see a consistent problem description and assessment of needed measures. In *Developing Higher Education* from 2005, the Swedish Council for Higher Education expressed it in this way:

“Given the challenges facing higher education institutions, it seems obvious that a national authority is needed to serve as a forum for educational development in higher education and research while providing financial resources to support such activities.”

The social challenges that higher education is expected to contribute to have not diminished since 2005. Rather, the pace of change in society has increased significantly as a result of the ongoing digitisation process. Over the course of this assignment, it has become clear to us that there are several important initiatives taking place throughout Sweden to develop teaching in higher education. Currently, however, a significant part of educational development in higher education is carried by enthusiasts, informal contact networks and national networks, such as Swednet, Include, ITHU, and Sverd. Since the closure of the first Council for Higher Education (2005) and then the Swedish Agency for Networks and Cooperation in Higher Education (NSHU) (2008), it has become difficult to obtain project funding for large, trans-institutional development projects and for research on the development of higher education.

**As a result, we have formulated the following assessments and proposals on several levels:**

- Invest in a national strategy for educational development in higher education
- Invest in a national strategy for digitisation of higher education and research
  
- Expand the Swedish Council for Higher Education’s mandate to promote educational development
- Strengthen the role of the Swedish Research Council
- UKÄ continues to review and analyse

# Who promotes educational development in higher education at the national level?

Which organisations currently collaborate at a national level to strengthen educational development in higher education at Sweden's HEIs? How are roles assigned and what can be improved?

Ever since the Swedish Agency for Networks and Cooperation in Higher Education (NSHU) was shut down at the end of 2008, there has been no authority for collaboration with a national grasp of issues related to educational development in higher education and research. The authority worked mainly on promoting educational development, widening participation and IT-supported distance learning.

Some parts of NSHU's mission have now been addressed by the sector itself through work carried out in various constellations. Examples include the Swedish Network for Educational Development in Higher Education (Swednet), which stimulates educational development in higher education; the Include network, which promotes widening participation in higher education; and the IT Network in Higher Education (ITHU), which focuses on the educational use of communication, video, meeting environments and virtual learning environments. Together, these networks fulfil a need to collaborate across the institutional boundaries for inspiration and knowledge transfer. Their activities are of central importance. Although the activities of these networks have varying focuses, they all have a close connection to teaching and learning in higher education. Through their activities, they help adapt higher education to new challenges and opportunities.

By collaboration with these networks while working on the government assignment, we have learned more about their conditions and proposals for improvement. They propose strengthening collaboration at the national level, conducting development and research on teaching and learning in higher education and promoting such work by a central body. Individual teachers and researchers should be able to apply for external grants for major development projects and there should be additional opportunities for collaboration across institutional boundaries.

## **Stiff competition for project funding**

When the government allocated extra quality funding for distance learning in 2019, a larger number of applications were received.

Universities, university colleges and vocational colleges that conduct distance learning were able to apply for a total of SEK 10 million. The Swedish Council for Higher Education (UHR), which administers the initiative, received 77 applications for project funding that exceeded SEK 59 million. That was six times the amount budgeted.

The high number of applications says something about both the potential that exists and the stiff competition for project funding. In addition, educational development and research projects have had difficulty obtaining funding through the Swedish Research Council (SRC). SRC provides support for basic research in educational sciences related to the development of the school system and preschools. Currently Sweden has few opportunities to ensure the development of knowledge within the field of higher education and to finance research related to developing higher education and teaching and learning in higher education.

## **The need for a permanent work group**

The Association of Swedish Higher Education Institutions (SUHF) has created a work group for teaching and learning in higher education that will operate for two years, 2019–2020. According to SUHF, the association has long dealt with issues related to teaching and learning through temporary work groups, which dealt with one or more specific issues in the field. Often the groups compiled material, presented proposals for measures and identified other related issues for study that would be useful for the sector. When these groups have completed their assignments and submitted their results, there often lacked any organisation to continue working with the material. For this reason, SUHF is currently investigating the need for a more permanent work group for teaching and learning in higher education.

## **Students' unions demand improvements**

The Swedish National Union of Students (SFS) has called for improvements several times in recent years. For example, in the 2013 report *Studentens lärande i centrum* (“Student-centred Learning”), they demanded that the Swedish government develop a national strategy to improve teaching at higher education institutions and to make a significant national and strategic investment in educational development and research. And in 2016 SFS and the Swedish Association of University Teachers (SULF) jointly appealed to HEIs and the Swedish government to address four demands for better conditions for teaching and learning in higher education. The demands were presented during a joint seminar in Almedalen: *Maxad högskola – hur maximerar vi lärandet?* (“Maxed out universities – how do we maximise learning?”)

Among other things, SFS and SULF advocate educational training for all teachers, placing a higher value on teaching expertise when positions are filled, more resources from the Swedish government and follow-up by the government on the conditions for academic leadership.

## **Systematic collaboration process at the national level**

Based on our work on the government assignment, we see that there is a great demand for targeted research and development funding at the national level, in addition to clear priorities and initiatives at the university level. There is also a need for a stable national structure that promotes the continued development of higher education and teaching and learning in higher education and facilitates continuous exchange of experience and dissemination of information.

Achieving this requires more intensive and more effective collaboration, but also a clear division of responsibilities among different organisations and parties in the sector – including UKÄ. We envision a systematic collaboration process, beginning with national strategies and international agreements such as the joint communiqués of the European Education Ministers.

In summary, this involves launching a systematic process at the national level with clear roles and division of responsibilities and long-term planning among authorities that promote, strengthen and assess.

# Our assessments and proposals

Based on the roles we have, how can we – jointly and individually – contribute to systematic, long-term and sustainable educational development that promotes student learning and higher education that maintains high quality?

## **About our assessments and proposals**

The Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ) presents here a number of proposals and assessments that we hope will create stable conditions for strengthening the HEIs' educational development efforts.

In short, our proposals require a more systematic cooperation among public authorities and a clarification of our roles. How are our respective roles interconnected, and how can we mutually strengthen the sector's development through good collaboration and planning?

As a result of the independence of the HEIs, there is a risk that issues such as educational development and other issues for which there is a need for a national coordinating function will be fragmented as time goes on because initiatives and stakeholders are not coordinated and pull the activities and operations in different directions. Therefore, we call for a national strategy for educational development in higher education that can point in a common direction and act as a unifying force for the sector's efforts.

Although our assessments and proposals are presented here under different headings, they are meant to function as a whole and reinforce one another.

## **Invest in a national strategy for educational development in higher education**

We believe that the quality of higher education would be improved if there were a national strategy for educational development. A common strategy could provide direction and set goals for higher education institutions (HEIs) and thereby act as a unifying force for the sector's own work.

However, it is not within UKÄ's area of responsibility to develop such an overall strategy or national guidelines for the work of HEIs on educational development. In our judgement the HEIs should unite around an effort with a joint strategy or plan for educational development. Such an effort could be led by the Association of Swedish Higher Education Institutions (SUHF).

During our work we have also identified some intractable issues that are not within the authority's area of responsibility. We would like to pass these on to the sector so that the HEIs have the opportunity to continue working with them. It is clear to us that educational development affects many parties in the sector, so it requires close collaboration.

For this reason, in March 2020, UKÄ will organise a (virtual) collaboration conference along with SUHF's work group for teaching and learning in higher education, which will provide an opportunity to discuss the next steps together. In this way we want to contribute to the continued development of teaching and learning in higher education. We hope that UKÄ's knowledge of the overall national picture will benefit the sector.

## **Invest in a national strategy for digitisation of higher education and research**

The national digitisation strategy that the government approved is based on the vision of a sustainable digitalised Sweden. The overall goal is for Sweden to lead the world in capitalising on digitisation. To achieve this, the government has set intermediate goals for modernising the Swedish education system, among other things.

Two years ago, in 2017, the government decided on a national strategy for the school system. The Swedish Agency for Education has subsequently been tasked with promoting digitisation of the school system. Sweden still lacks a comparable national strategy for digitisation of higher education and research, unlike Norway, for example, which has developed a *Strategy for digitisation in higher education and research 2017–2021*.

UKÄ believes that Sweden needs a national digitisation strategy for higher education and research and that it should be developed. Teaching and learning in higher education should be included in the strategy because being able to provide higher education adapted to current needs is extremely important. This applies to everything from access to higher education, lifelong learning and sustainable development to expanded recruitment, widening participation and internationalisation.

We therefore propose that a digitisation strategy for higher education and research be developed by the Ministry of Education and Research in collaboration with relevant and affected stakeholders. The strategy should also include how the results of the strategy are to be followed up and evaluated.

## **Expand the Swedish Council for Higher Education's mandate to promote development**

UKÄ proposes that the Swedish Council for Higher Education's (UHR) mandate should also include promoting educational development in higher education.

Among other things, the UHR should disseminate information and good examples of how HEIs work on educational development. In addition, UHR should be a unifying force and a forum for exchange of experience among different parties in the sector at the national level. The role may also include utilising analyses and assessments conducted by UKÄ and supporting continued development based on these.

The government should also task UHR to continue expanding administering and awarding development and project funding to strengthen the continued development of higher education and teaching and learning in higher education. UKÄ's proposal aims to meet the needs of the sector that have been identified. Increased national coordination is among the needs that have been identified. A broader mandate to promote educational development in combination with searchable project funding would create the potential for larger and innovative development projects and ensure that networks such as Swednet, Include and ITHU can continue in their efforts.

For these purposes, special funds should be allocated to UHR. We estimate that allocations need to be increased to SEK 20 million annually in a long-term effort to award project funding and support national networks.

## **Strengthen the role of the Swedish Research Council**

UKÄ proposes that the Swedish Research Council (SCR) be tasked with strengthening the development of knowledge and the scholarly foundation for teaching and learning in higher education.

We therefore propose that the tasks of the Educational Sciences Committee be supplemented or clarified to allow the committee to provide support for basic research related to the development of higher education. This would also mean strengthening the Educational Sciences Committee with expertise in teaching and learning in higher education.

UKÄ also proposes that the government tasks SCR with establishing a research school for teaching and learning in higher education. To strengthen the basis for national research on teaching and learning in higher education in the long term, we need to train 10–20 doctoral students per year for five years at a cost of SEK 1 million per year and per doctoral student. This can be compared with a similar research school for teacher trainers, which costs SEK 70 million per year. For this assignment, SCR should receive special funds.

UKÄ also sees a need for a targeted initiative to support research on teaching and learning in higher education. SCR should also receive special funds for this assignment.

We conclude that the above proposals will lead to a strengthened basis for national research on teaching and learning in higher education. This would generally elevate the status of teaching and learning in higher education in Sweden.

## **UKÄ continues to review and analyse**

UKÄ's vision is to ensure that Sweden is a knowledge society. We review the quality of higher education and the system of higher education institutions for quality assurance of higher education and research. In addition, we follow up and analyse developments in the higher education sector.

Educational development carried out at higher education institutions is an important part of quality assurance procedures, and thereby of interest to the authority. UKÄ already reviews how the HEIs develop courses and study programmes and how they ensure that their programmes are designed and implemented in a way that encourages students to take an active role in learning processes. This is done within the framework of UKÄ's quality assurance system. The knowledge and material resulting from the quality assurance process can be used by UKÄ for further review or in-depth analysis of the efforts made at the higher education institutions to improve courses and study programmes.

In addition, during work on the government assignment, we have identified some interesting areas that we can follow up under a separate arrangement, such as the quality of teaching and learning in higher education course activities, the possibility of mutual recognition of educational qualifications, the work on assessing educational qualifications and career paths based on educational qualifications.

The Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ) will contribute to strengthening the Swedish university college and Sweden as a knowledge society We review the quality of higher education programmes, we analyse and follow up trends within higher education and we monitor the rights of students.

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