

The Swedish Higher Education Authority's Pandemic Assignment

Final report



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Summary

UKÄ (the Swedish Higher Education Authority) has been tasked by the Government to follow-up on the consequences for higher education and research of decisions and initiatives taken because of the novel corona virus. The aim of the follow-up is to be able to analyse the results of the efforts made and learn from the effects on higher education and research in both the short and long term. This report is the final report regarding the assignment.

Many of the effects on higher education and research that UKÄ has seen will most likely be short-lived, but some will be more long-lasting and, in some cases, they may have a permanent impact on the higher education institutions (HEI). The decrease in international student mobility during the pandemic was largely temporary, but there are still fewer exchange students than there were before the pandemic. The increase in disciplinary cases during the pandemic has been strongly linked to the transition to digital examinations, which has meant a sharp increase in unauthorised collaboration.

The expansions and the short-term increase in the influx of students during the pandemic have not contributed to any widening participation. Nor has it meant a significant influx into the HEI:s of people who have become unemployed or laid off. Students with highly educated parents have increased their participation in higher education more so than those whose parents have pre-secondary education. Thus, previous patterns of socially imbalanced recruitment were reinforced during the pandemic. In addition, women to a greater extent than men started studying during the pandemic. The same pattern can be seen in all forms of study and applies to those who became unemployed or laid off during the pandemic and who started studying in higher education. At the same time, the pandemic had a limited impact on the labour market for the most recent graduates.

UKÄ can also state that higher education has expanded in line with the additional availability of government funding. Overall, the number of full-time equivalents increased slightly more than governmental expansions. In some cases, the funding for expansion could have been distributed in a way that better corresponded to the HEI:s ability to scale up their educational activities. Many HEI:s have also had difficulties in the short term in fully making use of the funds in an expanded educational organization, which, together with lower costs during the pandemic, has resulted in financial surpluses in operations and increased the agency capital.

In other aspects, the pandemic may have changed the HEI:s permanently. This applies not least to teaching, where the large-scale transition to distance learning during the pandemic has accelerated the development of digital forms of teaching and examination. UKÄ notes that the HEI:s have managed the transition well. The students' understanding of the situation, on the other hand, is divided – some have gained a more positive view of online learning, but not everyone shares that view. While most people rate their educations highly, according to the students, quality has suffered due to the transition. Students' expectations regarding teaching/learning flexibility will likely increase not only in the short term but also in the long term, as a result of the pandemic. At the same time, it will require a development of the didactic view as to when different forms of teaching are appropriate.

For many students and for the staff at the HEI:s, the transition during the pandemic has involved problems and difficulties. Many have experienced an increased workload, and for both students and employees, there has been an increase in, among other things, stress, and anxiety. The reduction in social interaction brought on by teleworking and distance learning is an obvious change. The effects are visible in almost all parts of the HEI:s operations – from first and second cycle education to research and third cycle education, as well as international exchanges.

The pandemic runs the risk of having longer-lasting effects for some people. Doctoral students and junior researchers may be the group that has been hit harder by the pandemic, according to UKÄ's studies on the pandemic's long-term effects. For them, acquisition of qualifications is of major importance, and the setback caused by the pandemic is more noticeable to them than to more senior researchers with permanent tenure who have developed qualifications and networks. The pandemic also seems to have impacted third cycle education negatively.

The studies also point to continued confidence that internationalization is an important aspect of higher education, but it may need to be developed in view of the experiences and insights of recent years. Not least, there are hopes of using digitalization to broaden and improve international collaborations. Just as in teaching, students will probably place higher demands on flexibility and relevance in the exchanges. In the longer term, factors other than the pandemic, such as an increased focus on sustainability and the global development, are likely to have a greater impact not only on internationalization and student exchanges but on all aspects of the HEI:s operations.

Concluding discussion

The main finding from the studies carried out as part of the government assignment is that HEI:s have managed the transition during the pandemic well. There has been a strong determination – both among staff and students – to adapt to the situation to facilitate operations in other forms. At the same time, the transition to new forms of teaching and work has come at the cost of an increased workload and considerable strain for many of those who work in higher education.

UKÄ's extensive work with the government assignment shows that the transition may change the HEI:s in the long term in several areas. At the same time, without a conscious and active approach on the part of the HEI:s and other stakeholders, it will be difficult to take advantage of the opportunities that this period has created and meet the challenges that have arisen.

Meeting new demand for flexibility and accessibility while maintaining quality in education

The large-scale transition to distance learning has meant that education at universities and university colleges is likely to change in some respects, also in the long term through the development of new digital forms of teaching and examination.

As a consequence of the transition, students' expectations of flexibility in teaching have increased. For example, many students in the future will expect online education, even within campus-based education. But it is difficult to generalize. This is not only because the circumstances are different for different educations and subjects, but also because the image that students have of their education during the pandemic is divided. A group of students have gained a more positive image of distance learning and digital forms of teaching, but not everyone shares this view. It will be an important task for HEI:s to organize their educational programmes to better correspond to students' increased expectations of flexibility while maintaining educational quality.

There are also expectations that there will be an increase in the availability of higher education from a geographical perspective. The development of online education and examination methods can offer new opportunities to work, for instance, with widening participation and lifelong learning, but it can also address the current issue regarding study support for people who are changing their career direction. In nursing education, the restrictions during the pandemic have in several cases

meant an increased focus on the content and quality of work placements, which may become a permanent change. This provides opportunities for improved collaboration between HEI:s and the principals in healthcare with regard to work placements.

The lessons learned from the pandemic serve as a solid foundation for the continued development of digital learning and digital examination forms. But the question as to how higher education should be conducted is not just about a transfer of knowledge and how it can be organized in the best possible way. It is also about what an academic education should bring. Higher education shall develop students' abilities to think critically and to independently search, evaluate and exchange scientifically based knowledge. The social elements of higher education – the meeting with other students and teachers – are at least as important here as the formal content and structure of the education.

During the pandemic, there has been a digital development that universities and university colleges must adhere to. At the same time, the transition to distance learning has forced the HEI:s to reflect on the basic aspects of higher education – why education is conducted at universities and university colleges, and how it should be conducted. It is important that the HEI:s continue their reflection even after the pandemic, in parallel with digital developments. Active and conscious action by HEI:s is therefore required to fully utilize and build on the experience gained. At the same time, it is important to reflect on the risks that the change entails, not least for the quality of education. It is not certain that all the opportunities made available through this development are desirable.

Different HEI:s may choose different approaches and the choices they make will largely depend on their current educational focus and profile. In some respects, the experience of the pandemic will reinforce established orientations and profile areas, while in other cases they can lay the foundation for new developments.

Using new opportunities and addressing challenges for internationalization

Digitalization may also have opened up new opportunities for the internationalization of higher education and research. How universities and university colleges may be affected remains to be seen, but there is no doubt that they need to relate to digital development and include it as a factor in their change work.

Both before and during the pandemic, various initiatives for internationalization have been developed through the European Commission, such as the European Universities initiative (EUI). In the

alliances, it may be important to work actively with the combination of internationalization and digitalization.

In the longer term, factors other than the pandemic, such as an increased focus on sustainability and global development, are likely to have a greater impact on internationalization and the development of international student mobility.

Addressing the consequences of the pandemic for groups that have been hit the hardest

UKÄ's assessment is that research and third cycle education have not changed in the long term to the same extent as teaching in first and second cycle education. On the other hand, individual researchers and doctoral students have been affected negatively, and it is possible to see differences between different groups. Particular problem areas have included data collection and international collaborations. The reduced amount of – and in many cases the total absence – of social interactions as a result of teleworking has made intellectual exchange more difficult and negatively affected creativity in the research process.

It is the doctoral students and junior researchers who have been most affected by this, while more established researchers with developed networks and permanent tenure have been affected to a lesser extent. This can have negative consequences for an individual's career development – in that it takes longer to establish as an independent researcher or, in the worst case, it can lead to an interrupted research career. The HEI:s as well as the research councils need to consider the reduced qualification opportunities that the pandemic has meant for these groups in the coming years. For other groups, too, the pandemic may have had negative consequences in the longer term.

The expansions and the short-term increase in the influx of students during the pandemic have not contributed to any widening participation. Students with highly educated parents have increased their participation in higher education more so than those whose parents have primary and lower secondary school education. In addition, women to a greater extent than men started studying during the pandemic. It is still too early to say whether this will be a lasting effect, but developments during the pandemic highlight an issue that HEI:s have been working with actively for a long time.

UKÄ's thematic evaluation of the work with widening participation being carried out by the higher education institutions, show that they are working with many different initiatives to break gender-based study choices in attempts to achieve a more even gender distribution in their educational programmes. In the same way, efforts are being made to help

reduce social imbalance in recruitment. In the evaluation, UKÄ concludes that the HEI:s efforts to recruit students from groups that are under-represented in higher education need to be planned and followed up more systematically in order to be successful in the long term. This work can be made more efficient if HEI:s collaborate. Gender-based study choices and socially imbalanced recruitment also occur earlier in the education system, and the evaluation, therefore, highlights the need to support and inspire collaborations between HEI:s and school principals to counter factors that impact study and career choices in society.

A transition to distance learning has not only taken place at universities and university colleges, but upper-secondary schools have also conducted teaching remotely for a long time. This means that in the coming years, HEI:s will accept students who have completed large parts of their education remotely. This concerns a group of students who are accustomed to digital teaching methods, but whose prior knowledge from their upper-secondary education may have been impacted negatively. An important task for higher education institutions will be to monitor how these students perform in higher education.

Lessons to learn for university governance in future crises

Finally, the experience of recent years can also contribute to the development of financial governance of the sector. Similar to the financial crisis ten years ago, the government decided to expand education significantly at universities and university colleges during the pandemic in order to lessen the negative effects of a deteriorating labour market.

The UKÄ notes that higher education has expanded to an extent that is in line with the government's goals for the expansions, but that many HEI:s have at the same time found it difficult to fully make use of the additional funding for educational activities. This has contributed to financial surpluses and an increase in agency capital. A similar situation prevailed in connection with the expansions in 2010–2011. It is difficult for higher education institutions to quickly scale up their activities and in order to be able to receive more students, many teachers have had to work hard. The HEI:s opportunities to expand their activities in line with additional funding would be enhanced if the increases in funding were gradual and more long-term. At the same time, through temporary expansion, the HEI:s have played an important role in helping to manage the crisis and the poor performance of the labour market.

Follow the post-pandemic recovery

In order to be able to draw conclusions with greater certainty about the pandemic's longer-term consequences for universities and university colleges, more long-term studies are needed that extend over a longer period of time. A large part of this work will be conducted within the government assignment that UKÄ has been given to assist in the implementation of Sweden's recovery plan.

Within the framework of the assignment, UKÄ will carry out analyses that contribute to the understanding of the HEI:s role in the recovery after the pandemic and that are based on the government's objectives with its national recovery plan. This includes conducting analyses that create an understanding of the long-term effects of the pandemic on the activities of HEI:s. The analyses will generate knowledge that, in the long run, will benefit the higher education sector's resilience in crisis and its capacity for recovery. This gives us the opportunity to continue to follow the development of the long-term consequences of the pandemic for the HEI:s operations.

The Swedish Higher Education Authority (Universitetskanslersämbetet – UKÄ) is to contribute to strengthening Swedish higher education 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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